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Narrative Criticism in the Gospels and Acts

Osvaldo Padilla
Beeson Divinity School

Abstract: *The essay at hand constitutes a review of the use of the discipline of literary criticism on the narrative sections of Scripture, particularly the New Testament. The essay explains how the phrase "narrative criticism" can refer both to a literary method that relies heavily on American formalism to exegete the narrative portions of the Bible as well as to a theological discipline that views narrative as a master genre that can yield fundamental insight into the works and character of God. The concentration of this essay is on the former category. A concrete example is given in a brief exegesis of Luke 7:36–50. We suggest that narrative criticism of the Gospels can be fruitful when it is practiced in connection with the socio-historical background of the Gospels as well as with an eye toward theology.*

Key Words: *Acts, Gospels, Hans Frei, higher-criticism, narrative criticism, narrative theology, reader-response*

When the phrase "narrative criticism" is employed in the field of professional theological and biblical studies, one of two meanings is usually being conveyed. First, there is the use of the phrase that primarily has to do with *method*. In this first case, scholars can simply employ the rules generated by literary critics, rules that were not initially formulated for use in biblical studies but for the investigation of the novel (see "Origins and Goals of Narrative Criticism" below for further development of this). Techniques were finetuned in the process of reading in order to maximize the depth of experience when reading narrative. Although narrative criticism of this type does work with a philosophical base, its primary aim is to *read*.[1] To be sure, there is a deep philosophical foundation for the concepts of meaning and hermeneutics that this type of narrative criticism can point to, if asked. Nevertheless, the mood no longer being controlled by modernity, this first type of narrative criticism operates within a much more Wittgensteinian ethos, where what ultimately matters is the actual

[1] Note how Wolfgang Iser, one of the fathers of this type of reading technique, speaks of his goal in *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), xi–xii. His emphasis is on the necessity of *reading* the texts in the process of formulating a theory. His later books deal more directly with theory.

performance of the activity in a communal context.

Thus, one approach to narrative criticism is a purely *descriptive* one. The practitioners simply apply to the text the methods that help in the understanding of categories such as setting, characters, plot, and so on. As such, this form of narrative criticism is essentially *practical*. Furthermore, it can in principle be used with any type of narrative—sacred or secular.

I now make one of the main observations in this essay: the type of narrative criticism that is used in the biblical guild, particularly in (but not limited to) evangelical circles, is just this type. It is mostly philosophically and theologically innocent at the foundational level; it is mostly concerned with the aid that the method provides in the exegesis of the narrative texts in the Bible.

The second type of narrative criticism that we can speak about is one which is essentially theological/philosophical in nature. The interest is not primarily with tools that, when used competently, may yield illumination of the text by observing how it has been constructed. The primary interest is rather with narrativity and its power in rendering that which is real. That is to say, the theologian is interested in narrativity because he or she believes that this is a more fitting way of describing God's interaction with humanity. In contrast to modernity, where theological communication was viewed as more amenable to the rational proposition,[2] narrative theologians believe that the story is just (if not more!) as universal as the proposition. Furthermore, it is argued that the biblical canon tells a *story*—with a past, present, and future—to communicate God's redemptive acts and thereby his identity. Narrative, therefore, is not just a genre within the Bible but a *master* genre, capable of bringing to light all aspects of theology. Consider the following statement about narrative in the influential work of Stanley Hauerwas and Gregory Jones: "[Narrative] is a crucial conceptual category for such matters as understanding issues of epistemology and methods of argument, depicting personal identity, and displaying the content of Christian convictions."[3]

An important example of the narrative approach described above is found in the work of the late Hans Frei, who taught for a number of years

[2] Or more precisely, the goal was ultimately to put into propositions the canonical witness so as to make logical connections between thoughts. It is not the case that narrative did not matter but that it was viewed as more "scientific" (*wissenschaftlich*) to put the Bible into dense, abstract concepts, in accordance with universal reason. My statement here primarily refers to the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries.

[3] Stanley Hauerwas and Gregory Jones, "Introduction," in *Why Narrative: Readings in Narrative Theology*, ed. Hauerwas and Jones (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 5.

at Yale Divinity School and is known as one of the fathers of so-called postliberal theology.[4] Frei's theological instincts concerning the concept of revelation were essentially Barthian. As such, he viewed the central locus of revelation as taking place in the economic existence of Jesus Christ. For Barth, this was the essential place of revelation, for the life and work of Christ are a true unveiling of the eternal God: "What God is as God, the divine individuality and characteristics, the *essentia* or 'essence' of God, is something which we shall encounter either at the place where God deals with us as Lord and Saviour, or not at all."[5] Following Barth, Frei reasoned that if revelation is at its core Christology, and if Christology is primarily found in the Gospels, then theology is a matter of the narrativized life of Jesus in the Gospels. The identity of Jesus Christ is not some abstract metaphysical essence but his *acts*. The identity of Jesus Christ—and therefore of God—is depicted in the actions of Jesus as found in the Gospels (Frei favored the Gospel of Luke). And so Frei wrote one of his two major books on this, with the title *The Identity of Jesus Christ*.[6]

For our present purposes, one of the fascinating aspects of Frei's book is just how little use there is of narrative critical tools in his exegesis. One would think that as a narrative theologian writing a book on the identity of Jesus in the Gospels, Frei would put to use the vast armamentarium available from narrative criticism. Yet, although some basic concepts of narrative are present, the exegesis mainly consists of observations and comments that could be made of any genre of Scripture. One rarely hears of plot, setting, implicit or explicit commentary, point of view, or other terminology that is constitutive of the practice of narrative criticism. What matters most is the "interaction of character and happening."[7] Or as Frei put it in another place: "Jesus was what he did and underwent, and not simply his understanding or self-understanding."[8] And these actions can be best depicted in direct fashion by the medium of narrative.

[4] On postliberal theology and its reading of New Testament narrative (especially the book of Acts), see Osvaldo Padilla, *The Acts of the Apostles: Interpretation, History and Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 199–223.

[5] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 2, part 1 (Doctrine of God), trans. T. H. L. Parker et al. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 261.

[6] Hans Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975). His other major book is *The Eclipse of Bible Narrative* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974).

[7] Hans Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1997), 62.

[8] Hans Frei, *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, ed. George Hunsinger and William Placher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 184.

To conclude this introduction, we can say that our attempt has been to tighten up our understanding of terminology. I have argued that when the phrase narrative criticism, or simply, narrative, is encountered in the literature, the reference can be to a more pragmatic, utilitarian use of a number of unique reading techniques that aid in the following two goals: understanding *how* a narrative has been constructed and understanding *what* the message(s) is that is being conveyed. One is likely to find this outworking of narrative criticism in biblical studies. A second meaning of the phrase narrative criticism is more theological. In Christian theology, many scholars understand the Bible as one long plot, a storied way of God's revelation of himself. A narrative approach is thus not so much a kit out of which tools are brought to open the how and the what of biblical texts; narrative is more a way of grasping doctrine in dramatic fashion. This manner of doing theology is viewed as more fitting for the disclosure of personal identity: "A … great advantage of narrative is that it is well suited for articulating a person's identity. Human or divine, a person's identity comes into focus more sharply not by listing various attributes or character traits but rather by recounting typical things that the person has done."[9]

In the sections that follow, my concentration will be on the *first* of the two approaches mentioned above, which I will continue to call narrative criticism. Yet, in the conclusion, I will return to speak about how both understandings of narrative criticism are ultimately ways of preserving academic study of Scripture after the fall of higher-critical method's tyranny over the study of the Bible and theology.

Origins and Goals of Narrative Criticism

We mentioned briefly above that narrative criticism was not a discipline formulated in biblical studies but in the study of literature. It will now be helpful to go a little deeper in this respect if we are to gain a better grasp of the method.[10]

[9] Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*: *A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 93–94.

[10] The following are good starting places for the study of narrative criticism: Stephen D. Moore, *Literary Criticism and the Gospels: The Theoretical Challenge* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989); Mark A. Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990); Daniel Marguerat and Yvan Bourquin, *Pour lire les récits bibliques: Initiation à l'analyse narrative* (Genève: Labor et Fides, 2004). This last work has been translated into English as *How to Read Bible Stories*. Whenever it is quoted in this essay, it is from the French and the translations are my own.

Narrative criticism is the incarnation in biblical studies of New Criticism and reader-response theory. The former is a view of art that arose after World War I. Some of the names linked to this theory, specifically in the domain of literature, are Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, and W. K. Wimsatt. In large part, New Criticism was an attempt to move beyond the "intentional fallacy" that was bequeathed to art theory by romanticism. This "fallacy" refers to the view that judges the quality of a piece of art on the basis of the relationship between the piece and the creator of the piece. To be more specific, the intentional fallacy speaks of a successful work only if it matches the intention which the author had when planning or producing the work. This view was questioned by the New Critics, with one essay in particular making a lasting impact.[11]

The New Critics argued that the success and/or meaning of a poem (shorthand for any literary work) should be determined by *the work itself*, not the intention of the author, which may never be recoverable. This does not mean that authors should not be asked about their works, especially when they are still living; but the best way to engage a literary work, argued the New Critics, is by concentrating on what the authors actually wrote, on the artefact that they have left in the possession of the public. For the question: how am I to know what the author was attempting to accomplish? The New Critical answer is the following: "The poem itself shows what he was trying to do."[12] The value of concentrating on the final form becomes clearer when dealing with ancient writings, where the author(s) is no longer present as a living human being. What we ultimately have access to is the *persona* of the author as projected through the work: "We ought to impute the thoughts and attitudes of the poem immediately to the dramatic *speaker* …."[13] This "dramatic speaker" will later come to be called the *implied author* (on which see below), and the implied author can only be encountered in the work itself. This is in broad contrast to a romanticist approach to art. Beardsley and Wimsatt ask us to remember the three art-critical questions of Goethe: "What did the author set out to do? Was his plan reasonable and sensible, and how far did he succeed in carrying it out?"[14] By contrast, what matters to the New Critic is entirely present in the work of art. Daniel Marguerat's words are helpful in explaining the New Critical view and how it relates to biblical studies: "The text is not read as a document that sends us back to a historical world

[11] The essay was written by Monroe Beardsley and W. K. Wimsatt, "The Intentional Fallacy," in Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1954), 3–20.

[12] Beardsley and Wimsatt, "The Intentional Fallacy," 4.

[13] Beardsley and Wimsatt, "The Intentional Fallacy," 5.

[14] Beardsley and Wimsatt, "The Intentional Fallacy," 11.

outside itself; it is not received as a document but as a *monument* that has value in itself…."[15]

The second literary theory that goes into the narrative criticism of biblical studies is reader-response criticism. This theory could be viewed as a variation of narrative criticism or as a separate discipline. If the New Critics concentrated on the text itself as the locus of meaning, reader-response approaches tend to move in the direction of the reader as the locus of meaning. In part moved by the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricœur, where meaning is something that occurs in the intersection between the effects of the work and the reader, reader-response criticism concentrates on the person's experience of reading.[16] Robert Fowler, who has done a lot of groundwork in biblical studies from the reader-response perspective, puts it in the following way: "The world I explore in this book is the world that lies in front of the biblical texts—the world I live in and the world in which readers have always lived, the world of the reception of the Gospels—rather than the world of their production."[17]

There is actually a spectrum in reader-response criticism. For some theorists, the meaning of a text is purely the domain of the audience: it is the contemporary reading community that provides justification for the proposed meaning of a literary work. Interpretative justification is more a matter of group consciousness than retrieval of the author's meaning. For other theorists, while the reception of the work in the present may be helpful (even crucial) in understanding the work, there is more caution in the treatment of the author. For example, we could say that the present experience of a reading community being exiled from its land may *nuance* and *deepen* comprehension of some Old Testament writings where exile is a major topic (e.g., the book of Ruth or Esther). It may be, to cite just one example, that Cuban-Americans exiled by the Castro regime may help us better grasp those Psalms where the author at times deeply laments his situation as a foreigner in a land far from Jerusalem. On the other hand, a reader-response approach that employs the contemporary category of exile (or gender or social status, etc.) to judge the value or truthfulness of the Bible can be problematic—both from the perspective of the ethics of authorship and for those who hold Scripture as divine revelation. In the latter scenario, the Bible is being approached, not to learn something of our traditional faith, but to sit in judgment over its values by virtue of the

[15] Marguerat, *Pour lire les récits bibliques*, 14 (emphasis added).

[16] See Joel Weinsheimer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics and Literary Theory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991).

[17] Robert M. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 2.

readers' present experience or situation. Christian tradition, by contrast, has viewed the reading and study of Scripture as an act where, by his grace, the living God meets us and thereby gives us life. In the reading of the Bible, an entity outside ourselves meets us in a dialogical manner, hence the tradition in many churches after a biblical passage is read: "This is the word of the Lord." We answer, "thanks be to God!" because we believe that we are hearing from God. The danger in some extreme forms of reader-response criticism is that we read the Bible only to hear echoes of ourselves. Instead of a dialogue between author and reader, what takes place is more of a monologue in disguise.[18]

To sum-up the origins of narrative criticism, we may say that if one were to search outside biblical studies for a discipline called "narrative criticism," one would find nothing, for a method with that exact name does not exist in literary theory. Nevertheless, from theories that *do* exist in the literary guild, biblical scholars have borrowed certain important principles and have applied them to the study of the Bible, particularly the narrative portions of the Bible. This is what is often meant by the phrase "reading the Bible as literature." I have highlighted one *aspect* (the centrality of the final form) from the New Critical movement; I have also concentrated on a *theory*, namely, reader-response criticism, where what is privileged is the effect of the work on the contemporary audience. Some in this latter camp simply want to use their situation in life (e.g., ethnicity and gender) to help better understand the biblical text and, in the process, themselves and their faith. Others use the biblical text as an entry for self-clarification, while still others read against the grain of the biblical text in order to "expose" its purported hidden ideology.

Whatever the ultimate goals for employing narrative criticism today, it is clear that those who originally borrowed from literary theory to use it in the exegesis of the Bible were doing so in order to provide a more concrete reading experience. In contrast to the putative sources and redactors generated by higher-criticism, and which often detracted from an aesthetically pleasing reading of biblical stories, narrative criticism could

[18] I find myself sympathizing with Jörg Frey's conclusion, although a bit overstated, on the countless reader-response perspectives filling the pages of the AAR/SBL annual meeting program. For Frey, "the proponents are concerned primarily with *self-clarification* before the text (and often also *against* the texts); the scholarly value for the understanding of the texts (both historically and in terms of substance) is, however, often small" (*The Glory of the Crucified One: Christology and Theology in the Gospel of John*, trans. Wayne Coppins and Christoph Heilig [Waco, TX: Baylor University Press/Mohr Siebeck, 2018], 4 n. 6. [emphasis added]).

concentrate on the concrete text as it stood. Just as important, it was becoming clearer that theological education based on the tenets of higher-criticism was producing clergy that did not know how to handle Scripture, thereby impoverishing the spiritual lives of their parishioners.[19]

The pioneers of Old Testament narrative criticism were Robert Alter and Meir Sternberg.[20] Alter begins by engaging the story of Tamar and Judah (Genesis 38), a story that is notoriously difficult to fit in the Joseph cycle of Genesis 37–50. As a result, scholars who approach Genesis from a higher-critical perspective have judged that Genesis 38 is an interpolation. Alter proceeds to demonstrate that if the story of Tamar and Judah is read with the patience and attention to patterns that is common in the interpretation of "secular" narrative, then a powerful message emerges that can be summarized as follows: "Judah with Tamar after Judah with his brothers is an exemplary narrative instance of the deceiver deceived."[21] In Alter's opinion, the finely wrought narratives of the Hebrew Bible, which attempt to portray life's irreducible complexity, may better yield their genuine meaning when they are approached with the principles of literary analysis instead of the assumptions of higher-criticism.

Sternberg is less indebted to New Criticism than Alter. Indeed, apart from the salutary warnings expressed against the "intentional fallacy," Sternberg rejects many of the theoretical foundations of New Criticism. In particular, Sternberg questions the a-historical bias of New Criticism, which, as a matter of principle, refuses to ask questions about the relationship between the text and the community it may be addressing. For Sternberg, the genre of biblical narrative (call it theological history) forces its readers to grapple with questions of history and historicity.[22] Sternberg also rejects the tenet of some camps in reader-response, namely, that meaning has nothing or little to do with the original author but is a matter purely of reception: "Even worse is the equation of author's and audience's meaning. What text the author made and what sense a reader and

[19] From a theological perspective, Karl Barth's *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Brian Cozens and John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1959), remains a most illuminating account. In German, an important account has been provided by Ulrich Wilckens, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, *band III, Historische Kritik der historisch-kritischen Exegese: Von der Aufklärung bis zur Gegenwart* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017).

[20] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981); Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985).

[21] Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 10.

[22] Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 1–57.

public made of it are always distinct in principle."[23]

With respect to New Testament literary criticism, it was the work of David Rhoads and Donald Michie who introduced into the New Testament guild the potential interpretative gains from reading the Gospel of Mark through the lens of literary criticism.[24] Rhoads, a New Testament scholar somewhat frustrated with higher-criticism (as expressed in source, form, and redaction criticism in biblical studies), asked his colleague from the English department, Donald Michie, to give his class on Mark a reading that freely employed the values and methods found in the interpretation of the short story. Rhoads found the lecture so illuminating that it led to the collaborative effort that is *Mark as Story*.[25] Methodologically speaking, the type of literary techniques employed in the book stem primarily from New Criticism. Perhaps the most important act in this respect was the willingness to move forward in reading Mark as a *narrative whole*. Rather than trying to guess what parts of the Gospel were the original strata and what parts were redactional additions by the evangelist (a very difficult endeavor, especially when applied to the Gospel of Mark), Rhoads and Michie simply explored the text at hand, making no assumptions about possible sources. In addition, their ultimate goal was not to discover the historical genesis of Mark; it was instead to observe *how* Mark constructed his Gospel and the effect it could have on the implied readers (on this category, see below).

The Tools of Narrative Criticism

In what follows, I mention and explain some of the most important factors in the communication model proposed by narrative criticism.[26] It will be helpful to think of three categories: the author, the reader, and the narrative.

The Author

The real author: This refers to the actual flesh-and-blood person who composed the work: Margaret Atwood as author of *The Handmaid's Tale*, for example. We must recall that from the heritage of New Criticism, narrative criticism is not tied to the real author as a source of meaning. That is to say, the reader does not need to know what was happening in the life

[23] Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 10.

[24] David Rhoads and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982). The book is now on its third edition.

[25] Rhoads and Michie, *Marks as Story*, xv.

[26] See also Marguerat, *Pour lire les récits bibliques*, 18–108.

of the author to understand the meaning of the work (was she sick when she wrote? Was she in a happy epoch of her life? Did she have children? etc.). The meaning, most narrative critics insist, is in the work itself.

The implied author: This refers to the author as we come to know him or her through the story. This is the *persona* of the author in the narrative, who is a reconstruction of the real author for the purpose of telling the story. The implied author may be presented as identical to the real author; at times, however, the implied author may be radically different from the real author. For example, although the real author may be a man in his forties, he may take on the *persona* of a teenage girl in narrating the story. The possibilities are numerous in the gap that can be created between the real author and the implied author, especially in the modern novel.

Do the real authors of biblical narrative make changes to their narrativized *personae*? The answer, to the extent that we can give an answer, would depend on the genre. In the Gospels, which I consider to be ancient biographies,[27] it is crucial that the real author be a direct or indirect witness of the Jesus-event. Therefore, I doubt that the evangelists wanted to create a gap between themselves and the implied author. Because the incarnation is the entrance of the Son of God into the immanent world in order to save humanity through his obedient life, crucifixion, and resurrection, *narration* of this entrance must accord with the action itself. And the accuracy of this narration in historical genres (such as ancient biographies) depends on the classical Greek concept of *autopsia*, where the author had to be himself an eyewitness of the events he narrates or have interviewed those who were eyewitnesses.[28] This is why the author of Luke-Acts opens his first volume, the Gospel of Luke, with the language of *autopsia* in 1:1–4. The picture of himself that he presents as implied author is of one who met the requirements of *autopsia*.

From what has been said above, the reader will realize that the relationship between real author and implied author may not only move in one direction, namely, from the real to the implied. It can be the case in historical works (and many times it is) that the implied author nudges the audience into the belief that the real author is one thing when he or she really is not. In other words, historians have been known to lie! The obvious question in the case of the Gospels and Acts, then, is the following: Are the implied authors identical with the real authors, namely, witnesses of the life and passion of Jesus? Or is the *persona* of the implied author in

[27] See most recently Craig Keener, *Christobiography: Memory, History, and the Reliability of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019).

[28] See John Marincola, *Authority and Tradition in Ancient Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 67–127. On this importance of *autopsia* in the Acts of the Apostles, see Padilla, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 77–121.

the Gospels, who generates trust in the audience by narrating as an eyewitness or simply telling the audience directly that he *was* an eyewitness (John 21:24), fundamentally different from the real author? And how would we know?

The early church understood this potential problem and addressed it. Irenaeus, in particular, by a combination of received tradition and exegesis, argued that the authors of the four Gospels and Acts were either apostles or companions of the apostles.[29] Thus, the early church (Irenaeus being one example) believed that the Gospels were written by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, all direct or indirect witnesses of the Christ-event. This ensured the Gospels as products of eyewitness testimony. To be sure, although our modern Bibles include the name of the evangelist at the heading of each Gospel, these Gospels are formally anonymous in that the evangelists' names are not part of the work itself. That is, in comparison to, say, Paul, who included his name in the actual body of his letters, the four evangelists did not include their names, although it is likely that the first copies of the Gospels circulated with flyleaves with the evangelists' names on them.[30]

It is precisely here that narrative criticism has proved helpful to many. Narrative critics may say the following: you do not need to know who really wrote Ruth or 1–2 Samuel or (as in our case) the Gospels and Acts in order to study them. You have the texts and the implied author who leads you in how to read those texts: read and learn! The point, then, is that we can engage the claims, constructions, and effects of the text in the present even if we lack information about the origins of the text. And in any case, the argument goes—in good New Critical spirit—we do not depend on the identity or situation of the author to interpret, for that would be to fall into the intentional fallacy.

On the one hand, then, the concept of the implied author is very helpful when dealing with narratives, especially anonymous ones. The author is "intrinsically present" in his work by means of the implied author.[31] The key is the following: with the implied author, one does not need to know the real author to make sense of the text. This may be the best gift that narratology has bestowed on contemporary biblical studies. On the other hand, I would argue that there is pressure placed on the readers of the Gospels and Acts, placed there by the authors themselves, to go backwards, as it were, and think of the real author as not in essence different

[29] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.

[30] See Martin Hengel, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Collection and Origin of the Canonical Gospels*, trans. J. Bowden (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity International Press, 2000).

[31] Marguerat, *Pour lire les récits bibliques*, 19.

from the implied author. That is to say, the kerygmatic nature of the Gospels and Acts is such that the readers are not encouraged to search for the gap between real author and implied author. The implied author is an *extension* of the real author, who himself is an eyewitness of the events of reconciliation described in the narrative. In this sense, it is often the case that the *nature* of the biblical narratives tacitly prohibits an endless game between the real and implied author.

The Narrator: Marguerat has helpfully explained that if the implied author is the "subject of the narrative strategy," then the narrator "is the *voice* that guides the reader in the narrative."[32] The difference between these two entities of narrative criticism may be grasped with the more concrete example of the Gospel of Matthew. Again, Marguerat explains, "If one is interested in the author of the first Gospel, one speaks of the narrator Matthew to describe the narrative production that he puts in place. One speaks of Matthew the implied author to make an image of the author in synthetizing the competences ... that he invests in his text."[33] With this example, it becomes clear that in biblical narrative the narrator does not occupy the important place that one finds in the modern novel. As such, the narrator is functionally equivalent to the implied author. In our demonstration of narrative criticism under "A Narrative-Critical Analysis of the Sinful Woman Episode: Luke 7:36–50" below, we will often use the name "Luke" to refer to the implied author and narrator.

The Reader

The category of reader works symmetrically with the category of author.

The real reader: This refers to the known flesh-and-blood individuals who will receive the work (e.g., a particular book club in a city in the United States).

The implied reader: This entity stands in symmetry to the implied author. As such, the implied reader is the reader as imagined by the implied author. The implied author, now in the *persona* chosen to narrate the story, is addressing a group that should possess the competence to understand the story as shaped by the implied author. The goal is that this imagined and shaped reader would understand the story. Fowler is helpful here: "The implied reader is the reader we must be willing to become, at least temporarily, in order to experience the narrative in the fullest measure."[34]

The Narratee: This entity stands in symmetry to the narrator. Just as we

[32] Marguerat, *Pour lire les récits bibliques*, 20 (emphasis original).

[33] Marguerat, *Pour lire les récits bibliques*, 20–21.

[34] Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand*, 33.

noted that the narrator is not as such an accentuated entity in biblical narrative, so it is with the narratee.

The Narrative

What is a narrative? Following the work of J. M. Adam, Marguerat states that in order to speak of a narrative, the following must be present: (1) temporal succession of events; (2) the presence of an agent/hero that moves the story towards an end; (3) a plot that links together the actions into a unity; and (4) a chain of cause and effect.[35]

Concretely speaking, one way to examine the story from the narrative criticism perspective is to break down each episode into three parts: setting, characters, and plot.[36] In what follows, our illustrations of these parts will stem from the Gospels and Acts.

First, then, there is the setting, which can be of three types: spatial, temporal, or social.[37] The biblical tradition is as a whole more economic in its description of setting than modern narrative literature. This economy, however, should not be confused with lack of importance. In the Gospels and Acts, the setting of the action can be very telling in the message being communicated, with some settings at times acquiring symbolic significance. For example, in all the Gospels but perhaps mostly in Matthew, *mountains* often have revelatory significance. This is established from the early parts of the Gospel of Matthew, where Jesus's primary revelatory sermon will be the Sermon on the Mount of chapters 5–7. Matthew makes the mountain motif clear by introducing the speech with "he went up to the mountain" in 5:1.[38] The transfiguration, another crucial revelatory event, also happens on a "high mountain" (17:1). It is likely that Matthew picks up the theme of mountains as places of revelation from the Old Testament Sinai tradition, where Yahweh reveals himself to Moses on the mountain.

It should be noted that before the advent of narrative criticism, biblical scholars already observed the importance of setting for communicating theological ideas. For example, redaction criticism, which operates from the presuppositions of higher-criticism, noted the symbolic meaning of

[35] Marguerat, *Pour lire les récits bibliques*, 24.

[36] I have used this format previously on the Acts of the Apostles. See Osvaldo Padilla, *The Speeches of Outsiders in Acts: Poetics, Theology and Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[37] For further examination of setting, see Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?*, 70.

[38] Translations from the Greek text are my own. Note that the NIV translates v. 1 with "he went up on a *mountainside*." This is a curious translation, probably an apologetic attempt to harmonize with Luke 6:17.

mountains in the Bible. Narrative criticism differs in at least two ways. First, less importance is attached to figuring out the specific locale on a map of the setting mentioned in the text. Second, the question of the biblical author's geographic *accuracy* is not often raised—not because it is unimportant but because the concentration is more on the contribution of the setting to the narrative as such.

The second part that should be studied is the characters. One way to explore the importance of characterization in narrative criticism is by comparing it to characterization in higher-criticism. It would be fair to say that the primary difference is just the amount of attention that is given to characters as such in narrative criticism. In higher-criticism, characters were not ignored; but to the extent that narrative criticism builds on modern conceptions of narrativity—where there is great density of character interpretation—so it is to be expected that the category of characters receives more attention in narrative criticism than it did in higher-criticism.

Theories of characterization in narrative move fast, and so it is difficult to give a definitive *status quaestiones* on the subject. However, we can say that, in comparison to the initial attempts, contemporary theories of narrativity have grown in complexity in this matter. We find Christopher Skinner's analysis helpful in its application to the Gospels.[39] Instead of the somewhat simple concepts of "round" and "flat" characters, Skinner suggests a continuum, with characters straddling at least three categories. First, we can think of characters as *agents*, where their primary function is just to move the plot forward. Second, we can think of characters as *types*, whose development usually includes one main static trait. Third, Skinner speaks of "full-blown characters," who receive direct and indirect characterization.[40] With these observations, we can thus say that the difference in characterization between narrative and higher-criticism is not just quantity but also the quality of depth.

Lastly, we come to the third area, namely, the plot. Simply put, the plot is what takes place in the narrative. Although this definition of plot is simple, approaches to discover how it is constructed and what message is being communicated by it are, by contrast, complex. Of the many possible ways of exploring plot, we suggest the quinary model, which is a nuancing of Aristotle by P. Larivaille.[41] Marguerat has helpfully applied this model

[39] Christopher Skinner, "Introduction: Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John: Reflections on the *Status Quaestionis*," in *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John*, ed. Christopher Skinner, LNTS 461 (London: T&T Clark, 2013), xvii–xxxii.

[40] Skinner, "Introduction," xxv.

[41] P. Larivaille, "L'Analyse (morpho) logique du récit," *Poétique* 19 (1974): 368–88. See Aristotle, *Poetics* 1455b, 24–29.

to biblical narrative.[42] As its name indicates, this plot has five parts: (1) the Initial Situation, which provides the readers with the information needed to make sense of the narrative; (2) the *Nouement*, where we find the beginning of dramatic tension; (3) the Transformative Action as the "pivot point" of an episode, as such determining the destiny of the narrative; (4) the *Dénouement*, which stands in symmetry to the *Nouement*: it represents the resolution of the initial cause of tension; (5) the Final Situation, which is in symmetry to the Initial Situation. By the time we reach the Final Situation, the tension is clearly at an end. After this, a new episode may begin at either the micro- or macro-level. In the case of the latter, this may constitute the end of the work.

Below, we provide an example from the Gospel of Luke that employs the tools of narrative criticism.

A Narrative-Critical Analysis of the Sinful Woman Episode: Luke 7:36–50

Context

We have noted the importance that narrative criticism puts on reading both long and short episodes as linked units. Unless there are strong reasons to the contrary, readers should pay close attention to narrative connections between one episode and the other, for often a theme or set of themes is announced in this fashion.

In the interpretation of the sinful woman of Luke 7, we can see at work the differences between a narrative approach and a higher-critical one when it comes to the importance of theme by means of linked units. Taking the monumental commentary of Joseph Fitzmyer as an example of the higher-critical approach, we note the following.[43] First, Fitzmyer sees no significant thematic connection between the current and previous episodes that are part of the larger unit (4:14–9:51, according to Fitzmyer). He states, "In itself, [this episode] is unrelated to the three preceding passages, and it is not easy to discern the reason why it has been added at just this point."[44] We find this to be a remarkable statement in light of the many connections that will be pointed out below![45] Second, Fitzmyer is

[42] Marguerat, *Pour lire les récits bibliques*, 56–64.

[43] Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (I–IX)*, AB 28A (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970).

[44] Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 684.

[45] On the other hand, Michael Wolter, *Das Lukasevangelium*, HNT (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 290–91, notes many stimulating thematic connections between the passages. Note that Wolter operates from a combination of historical and narrative interests.

keen in discovering Luke's sources for the episode. He ultimately views the story as being derived from the discreet Lukan source called L. Furthermore, the story is "almost certainly" conflated because there are very similar stories in Matthew, Mark, and John. Third, this leads to the conclusion that an early story of a woman anointing Jesus floated around during the oral period of the gospel tradition. Each evangelist then took this basic story, and each expanded it for his own purposes.

One would think that this view of the material would potentially lead to a certain skepticism of the Lukan "additions." And yet, Fitzmyer does not make any judgments of historicity concerning even the details of the narrative. He continues to speak of Jesus doing, Jesus teaching, and so on. So one wonders, what was the purpose of the detailed historical investigation?

The late evangelical scholar I. Howard Marshall also devotes several pages to the tradition-history of the story.[46] For him, it is probable that verses 48–50 were a Lucan addition to an original core. Like Fitzmyer, however, Marshal does not note any interpretational significance. One wonders, again, how these observations of sources help with the meaning of the text.

The narrative-critical approach to this story, by contrast, does not speculate on sources. This does not mean that the complete text fell from heaven as one unit! In my view, it is likely that there *is* a complex tradition behind the final form of the story; furthermore, there may be occasions to investigate those. However, we cannot be certain about the specifics and how they help better to understand the text in question.

Reading the text as a unit with the previous episodes yields the following observations. First, a number of identical terms and concepts appear from 7:1 forward: love (7:5, 42, 47), faith (7:9, 50), prophet (7:16, 26, 39), and sinner/sins (7:34, 37, 39, 47, 48). Second, the concept of *humility* is present both in the story of the centurion's servant and the story of the sinful woman. The centurion, despite his social status, recognizes that he is "not worthy" (7:6) of receiving Jesus under his roof. Interestingly, those who come to deliver the message state the very opposite: "He is worthy," they say, to receive the healing of his servant, because the centurion "loves our people and himself built the synagogue for us" (7:4–5). The sinful woman is just like the gentile centurion in her humility. This humility is shown by her washing Jesus's feet with her tears and perfume and by drying them with her hair. We therefore have an example of *synkrisis* or comparison/contrast. To be noted is that both gentiles and women tended to be marginalized even in the early church. Yet, these are precisely the two

[46] I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 304–7.

characters Luke employs to exemplify humility and faith.[47] Third, we should note that the first time Pharisees are mentioned in chapter 7 is in a critical fashion (7:30). This prepares the way for the Pharisee's attitude in 7:36–50. Lastly, we note that the phrase "friend of tax collectors and sinners" is predicated of Jesus immediately before the story of the sinful woman (7:34), thereby preparing the way for the meaning of the narrative that follows.

Observing these connections, which are often absent from higher-critical studies of the passage because of its skepticism towards a unified text, already point us in the direction of the main themes of 7:36–50.

Setting

Luke is not interested in telling us the specific city or village where the event took place. The emphasis is rather on the fact that it happens in the home of a *Pharisee* (mentioned four times!). Given the clashes between Jesus and the Pharisees precisely over the status of sinners (see especially 15:1–32), the setting raises the expectation of *tension*.

Another spatial/social setting, which is easy to miss, is the *dining* scene. Luke tells us in verse 36 that Jesus "reclined." This is probably a reference to the *triclinium*, the dining room of the house, where the host and guests would eat, drink, and have discussions. Luke is likely evoking the long tradition of the *symposium*, where philosophical discussions took place. The symposium actually became a literary type, especially with Plato, and dialogues on topics such as ideal love, among others, where common themes (see *OCD*[3]). That Luke is evoking the symposium type may be shown by the mention of reclining and by the dialogical nature of the exchange between Jesus and Simon the Pharisee: "Simon, I have something to say to you" (v. 40); "Yes, teacher," Simon responds. Then, "Simon responded: 'I suppose [ὑπολαμβάνω] ...'" (v. 43). Lastly, "And he said, 'You have judged correctly'" (v. 43). Luke is thus portraying Jesus as the wise teacher and Simon as the pupil. However, because the narrator has an omniscient vantage point, he informs the readers that Simon actually does not hold Jesus in very high regard. In verse 39 Simon grumbles in his heart: "If this one were a prophet he would know who and what type of woman is this who is touching him, that she is a sinner." The setting, then, helps in characterization, to which we now turn.

[47] While possible, John Nolland's judgment that the controlling theme of 7:1–50 is the relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus overlooks the symmetry between 7:1–10 and 7:36–50. See John Nolland, *Luke 1–9:20*, WBC 35A (Dallas: Word, 1989), 351.

Characters

There are three characters on which Luke focalizes in this narrative: Jesus, Simon, and the sinful woman. Luke portrays Jesus as (1) a wisdom teacher in the symposium tradition; (2) one who welcomes sinners, even scandalous ones; (3) one who knows what is in the hearts of others; and (4) one who forgives sins. The last three traits, when viewed in the light of the Old Testament, indicate that the knowledge and actions of Jesus are those of the God of Israel. Did the original readers of the Gospel of Luke, then, view Jesus as God in the flesh? This is a question that dominates higher-critical methodologies. But we do not have access to the original readers in order to answer this question. We do, however, have the text, where it is clear that Jesus takes upon himself the prerogatives of God. Therefore, as implied readers, it is for us to wrestle with this central theological question.

Simon's character is portrayed negatively from the very beginning—the fact that he is a Pharisee is already a problem in light of 7:30. There, Luke tells us that "the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the will of God." Will Simon be one of these kinds of Pharisees? Or will he be the exception? Sadly, as the narrative continues, Simon's portrait looks very similar to that of the other Pharisees. In particular, we hear of his erroneous assessment of Jesus: Simon does not believe that Jesus is even a prophet! The readers, who have read of Jesus's healing from a distance (7:1–10) and his raising of the widow's son from the dead (7:11–17), have been given privy information about Jesus that shows how far from the truth Simon really is. Next, Luke continues Simon's negative portrayal by showing that he is not aligned with the values of Jesus, particularly with the latter's welcome of sinners. Lastly, in light of Jesus's statements of contrast in verses 44–46, the narrator is making it clear that the real host of that evening was not Simon but the sinful woman! Thus, even Simon's initial apparent virtue of hospitality is revised in light of his lack of actions—lack of love—towards Jesus. It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of hospitality in the ancient Mediterranean world. To lack that virtue is equivalent to being evil.[48] Simon's character therefore receives a double indictment: he is a poor host in general and a poor host of none other than Jesus the Son of God.

The third character is the sinful woman. Scholars have debated her potential status as a prostitute. Even though Luke does not use this term for her, I suggest that her actions at the symposium ironically represent

[48] The classic *topos* of an evil being, demonstrated by his lack of hospitality, is Polyphemus in the *Odyssey*. In the OT, Abraham's hospitality towards the angels demonstrates in future rabbinic Judaism that he is the virtuous man *par excellence*.

her as a *former* prostitute. How so?

The setting is the key. The setting is the key, for it is well known that symposia, in addition to being a *topos* for philosophical learning, often developed into places of eroticism.[49] Prostitutes would often enter the *triclinium* to play music, dance, and eventually engage in sexual acts with the men, who were likely drunk by that time. Thus, while in one sense it was scandalous for the sinful woman to sneak into a setting that was male dominated, in another sense, if she was known as a prostitute, then the *triclinium* may be exactly where she should be! But there is a catch, which deepens the irony. While the woman's being at the symposium and some of her actions (e.g., loosening her hair and kissing Jesus's feet)[50] may indicate that she is not a foreigner to the actions of a prostitute, Jesus's statements beginning in verse 44 reveal that her actions should not be construed as those of a prostitute but of a contrite, repentant, and grateful woman who is demonstrating, in over-the-top hosting, her love for the Jesus who has forgiven her.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that Simon the Pharisee's home was known as a place where symposia turned into sexual debacles! My point is simply that given the reputation of symposia in the Mediterranean world and the actions of the sinful woman, her character may be construed as that of a (former) prostitute. There are sufficient covert signs in the narrative for the implied readers potentially to reach this conclusion.

Plot

The *Nouement*, or beginning of tension in the narrative, starts immediately, as we noted above, with the fact that the host is a Pharisee. However, the tension begins to dominate the narrative with Luke's insertion of "behold" in verse 37. There follows a detailed description of the woman's identity and actions: she is a sinner, she knows that Jesus would be visiting the home of the Pharisee, she bought an alabaster jar of ointment, she entered the house, she stood crying at Jesus's feet, she dried his feet with her hair, she kissed his feet and anointed them with the perfume. The last three actions are presented by the use of the imperfect tense in Greek, thereby nudging the reader to view these actions from the inside, as it were.

Were the people in the symposium mumbling or shouting at this "indiscretion" of a sinful woman? By totally focusing on the actions of the woman, Luke has imposed a silence which raises the tension to its breaking point. At last in verse 39, we hear of Simon's thoughts, which lead to the Transformative Action of the plot: what will Jesus the "prophet" do

[49] For helpful examples and explanation, see s.v. "symposium," in *OCD*[3].

[50] See Wolter, *Das Lukasevangelium*, 293, for primary sources.

with this woman? As is often the case in Luke-Acts, the Transformative Action is a matter of *speech*, or we might say *speech-act*: something is said by one of the characters that moves the direction of the story with finality towards one horizon or another.[51] In this episode, Jesus, who has been presented as the philosophical teacher and leader, will (as a good teacher!) introduce a parable that constitutes in large part the Transformative Action. The simple parable of two debtors, one who owes little and the other much, is put to Simon: who will love more, the one forgiven little or the one forgiven much? Intellectually, Simon knows the answer; but because he is far from the values of Jesus (and the Old Testament!), he does not know how, or simply refuses, to apply the parable to the situation at hand. Jesus explains that the scandalous (yet hospitable!) actions of the strange woman stem from the fact that she loves much because she has been forgiven much. Simon, on the other hand, because he is a self-righteous Pharisee (cf. 15:1–2), does not realize that his little love for Jesus comes from the self-deception that he does not need much forgiveness.

There is a sense in which this narrative never reaches a *Dénouement* or the Final Situation. The internal question of the guests reinvigorates the tension all over again: "Who is this man who even forgives sins?" (7:49). The pronouncement of Jesus is the punchline of the story, thereby showing that this narrative is ultimately about the theological category of Christology: "And he said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you. Go in peace!'" (v. 50). The narrative is also about the categories of anthropology and soteriology. Anthropologically, those humans are received by Jesus who recognize, like the centurion of a previous episode, "I am unworthy." This unworthiness is simultaneously an act(s) of contrition and repentance, shown by the woman's audacious deeds. Soteriologically, the key words are faith and love. But note that Luke, in contrast to many of us, is not interested in showing *how* the woman came to believe in Jesus: did she hear him preaching? Did others tell her about him? Did the previous preaching of John the Baptist lead to her repentance and forgiveness?[52] These are important questions, to be sure. But Luke's *compression* of the material shows us that, for this narrative at least, what matters is a contrite faith that is demonstrated by extravagant love. Luke often employs compression or telescoping (e.g., Luke 24:1–53; Acts 2:1–36). This form of narrative ellipsis pushes the reader to concentrate on that which is actually said in the text, not to speculate or attempt to reconstruct.[53] At the end,

[51] See Padilla, *The Speeches of Outsiders*, for speech as the Transformative Action in Acts.

[52] This is Nolland's speculation, which at the end blunts the Christology of the text (*Luke 1–9:20*, 351, 353).

[53] On compression and ellipsis in Acts, see Padilla, *Acts of the Apostles*, 88–106.

then, this text is about how Jesus's love, demonstrated in forgiveness, is received by faith. This should lead the forgiven to genuine hospitality in the name of Jesus

Conclusion

Much more could be said about this beautiful episode. But I hope enough has been done to show the wealth of insight that narrative criticism can provide. I also hope that the reader notices that narrative criticism should be combined with knowledge of the socio-historical context of the text (e.g., the importance of the symposium tradition to understand this narrative). Lastly, I encourage a narrative criticism that can clarify the theological categories of the text—and these demand a response from us in a way that is perhaps more direct than classical higher-criticism.