

What To Look for in Reading a Biblical Narrative: Words-Actions-Narration-Dialogue

For details see Chapter 9 of Robert Alter's book, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*.

(a) **Words.** The choice or the mere presence of particular single words and phrases in the biblical tale has special weight precisely because biblical narrative is so laconic, especially compared to the kinds of fiction that have shaped our common reading habits. Look for repetitions in a story or across stories (e.g., *tam*). Leitwort or thematic key word: common way of developing the meaning of a story (e.g., "stone" or "blessing" or "first born" in Jacob cycle).

(b) **Actions.** Recurrences, parallels, analogy are the hallmarks of reported action in the biblical tale. The two most distinctively biblical uses of repeated action are when we are given two versions of the same event and when the same event, with minor variations, occurs at different junctures of the narrative, usually involving different characters or sets of characters. Type scene: annunciation of a birth, betrothal, God's blessing, and the like. Analogies between two scenes are often the only comment on a character's actions (Jacob steals the blessing from Esau and then is deceived by Laban via Leah/Rachel). More explicit modes of evaluation and judgment are avoided.

(c) **Narration.** Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the role played by the narrator in the biblical tales is the way in which omniscience and inobtrusiveness are combined. The narrator, like God, is all-knowing and perfectly reliable. Availability to God and his narrator of total coherent knowledge versus incompleteness of human knowledge. Predestination versus free will. Why are certain things told and not others? Practical aspect of all this: the reticence of the biblical narrator, his general refusal to comment on or explain what he reports, is purposefully selective.

(d) **Dialogue.** When a narrative event in the Bible seems important, the writer will render it mainly through dialogue, so the transitions from narration to dialogue provide in themselves some implicit measure of what is deemed essential, what is conceived to be ancillary or secondary to the main action. Questions to ask: Is the dialogue long or short, simple or elaborate, balanced or asymmetrical, perceptive or obtuse? Does one character answer the other? Why does the narrator choose to let the character reveal himself through speech at this time?