

H2R P10

Character in Biblical Narrative

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Character in Biblical Narrative

Jon: Hey, this is Jon at The Bible Project. Today on the podcast, we're going to talk about characters.

[short skit 00:00:15]

Not just any kind of character. We're specifically going to talk about characters found in the Bible. You see, we're in the middle of producing a series of videos called How to Read the Bible. What you'll notice reading the Bible is that there's a lot of stories and every story has characters.

Now, if you're like me, you might have wondered, why is there such little detail given to characters in the Bible? I want to know, what did that person look like? What were they thinking? Why did they do what they did? I want rich filled out characters.

Tim: The lack of detail is intentional and strategic, and it's frustrating for modern readers. We mistake it as just "Oh, this is a primitive, poorly told story. Look, all the characters are simple and that's just totally missing biblical narrative style.

Jon: Oftentimes, when we read the Bible, we have a tendency to put the characters in categories that we understand. You're either a good guy or you're bad guy. But to biblical authors, people aren't always that simple.

Tim: For the most part, biblical narrators refrain from sermonizing or moralizing characters. What they do is just set their choices in front of you, and then you have to be the one to evaluate. This minimalist style is trying to recreate, in the narrative, your experience of your own life. Moral realism of the human condition, most people aren't only good and only bad. We're all a mixed bag of different amounts.

Jon: That's today on The Bible Project podcast. Thanks for joining us. Here we go.

We're talking about how to read the Bible. We're in biblical narrative. We talked about plot and setting.

Tim: We're talking about the toolset that the biblical authors who are also artists have in their repertoire.

Jon: The techniques they use.

Tim: Yeah, all the different size brushes and colors and techniques that a painter uses that biblical authors have equivalent, or storytellers. When it comes to the role of characters in biblical narrative, I think this is actually one of the biggest hurdles these modern western readers have because our narrative tastes, through movies and through modern literature, have been shaped to expect a certain way the characters

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are described and develop. And biblical authors just have a really different way, really different way of employing characters.

In biblical studies, the most describe voices in this field, it's called narrative poetics, or the poetics of biblical narrative, they're Israeli Jewish scholars. It's just right down my book list. There's Shimon Bar-Efrat, and Adele Berlin and Meir Sternberg and Robert Alter.

Jon: Do you read those in Hebrew?

Tim: Some of them write in Hebrew, but their main works are in English. But they either grew up in Israel, or they're Jewish and have been reading Hebrew since childhood. Actually, I think that's the key. I think, for readers who were able to read biblical, especially the Hebrew Bible narrative as a part of their first or second language, you just experience it completely differently.

When you've grown up on this literature, it doesn't seem foreign to you, and it sure doesn't seem like children's literature to you. That's interesting. The most important works in the last 50 years have all been by Jewish or Israeli scholars.

Speaking of Robert Alter, who wrote one of the most significant works on biblical narrative - it's called "The Art of Biblical Narrative" - he has a couple chapters on the way characters' work in biblical narratives. He has this great quote.

He says, "The Greek storytelling tendency of loading the story with details is one that modern literary practice has by and large adopted and developed." His point is, is our modern taste for all kinds of descriptive characters, what they look like, where they grew up, this whole idea of when you introduce character, you're There are being given a window into their psychology. You get a little miniature biography, you're...we're just used to all of that detail.

Jon: That's the Greek thing?

Tim: That comes from the Greek narrative tradition. He says, "Precisely, for that reason, we have to adjust our habits as readers in order to bring an adequate attentiveness to the different narrative maneuvers that characterize the Hebrew Bible." This is great. "The underlying biblical conception of people's character is that they're unpredictable, constantly emerging from and slipping back into ambiguity."

Jon: What does he mean there? What does he mean by ambiguity?

Tim: Well, finish the last sentence. "Thus, biblical narrative style is marked by the art of reticence." Such a great phrase. Biblical characters are rarely almost never described

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with very much detail. There's just a small handful of characters whose appearance has ever described. You are seriously on the count of two hands moments where you're given the inner thoughts of a character for why they're doing something.

So the art of reticence, biblical narrative uses characters as a vehicle, primarily shoot through showing what they do, and what they say, rather than telling you about them or telling you why they do what they do. Showing rather than telling is the shorthand for that.

In other words, biblical characters are incredibly mysterious. That's why he says, "The underlying biblical conception of people's character is that they're unpredictable." God called Abraham to leave his family and go to this new land. Abraham left his family, and he went to the land and Lot went with him. And you're like, What? Wait. That wasn't the plan. He wasn't supposed to do that, why did not go with him?"

Then you're just left with this gap in this strange detail. You're never given Abraham's in your psychology of why he did what he did. You are shown his choice. Then as a narrative technique, it's a way you're showing a choice of a character, but the reader has to work for an interpretation. This is typical all the way through.

Genesis 22, God tests Abraham: "Take your son, your only son and give him as offering on the place I'll show you." And the reader, you're scandalized. You're like, "Why is God doing this? Why is God saying this? What's going on inside Abraham's mind? And you're never once given psychology. You are just given, "He wakes up early in the morning, he packed his bags."

Then, Isaac speaks up, "Dad, we have the wood, we have the fire, where's the ram for the offering?" "God will provide my son." But the richness of the story is precisely in the lack of detail because it makes the reader ponder and fill in the details yourself until you are given more information.

Jon: So the lack of detail is on purpose?

Tim: The lack of detail is intentional and strategic, and it's frustrating for modern readers. We mistake it as just, "Oh, this is a primitive, poorly told story. Look, all the characters are simple, black and white. They are not..." And that's just totally missing biblical narrative style.

That's what Alter is saying, we have to adjust our habits from constantly being given the inner dialogue of characters and learn how the biblical narratives force you to work. They are engaging you in a wrestling match by this.

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Just think through all these stories of the Bible, and all of a sudden, you'll start asking, "Oh, why did he do that? Why did God accept Abel's offering but not Cain's? Oh, was Cain jealous?" The story actually never says that. The story just says he got bummed.

Almost everyday story is capable, ultimately, of about three or four different interpretation in a way at a first pass, because you realize, "Oh, I'm not being given information. Half the information, I wish I had to make sense of the story." And you think it's an error in the narrative, but in fact, it's intentional thing.

Jon: And you're saying the value of it is it forces you to wrestle with it more.

Tim: We'll get there. We'll get there. But just it forces the reader to do a lot of things. It forces them to work. Ultimately, it's a very powerful tool that biblical narratives use. It might help us just get into some examples, and you'll just kind of see it.

Jon: Okay.

[00:09:52]

Tim: There's two ways that biblical authors can use characters. One is what's called direct characterization. The narrator will actually describe the character for you or tell you about them. This would be like physical appearance on a small list of people whose looks are described and it's only ever because it's irrelevant, it will play a role in the plot.

Joseph was very handsome. Potiphar's wife is going to get after him. "Lie with me," right?

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Saul is very tall when you first meet him. And you're like, "Okay, why is that important?" Then you get into the story—

Jon: David is short.

Tim: Yeah, David is short, but David's good looking. Esau, he's red hairy. He's covered with red hair. All these kinds of things. Looks are only described functionally because they'll play a role in the story. Occasionally, the narrator will just straight up tell you, "Yeah, this guy is bad." But it's very rare. It happens a lot. Like in the kings, the stories of the king, "This king was bad because of this."

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But for the most part, biblical narrators refrain from sermonizing or moralizing characters. What they do is just set their choices in front of you and then you have to be the one to evaluate.

One Jewish scholar, her name's Adele Berlin, she has a really great wave of talking about this about when the biblical authors do directly described characters, it's very rare, and it's always very strategic. And she compares it to impressionist painting.

Similar to René Magritte about his contrast with realism and saying, "That's always representation." So he's a part of Surrealist Movement. The Impressionist movement was explicitly trying to draw attention to the fact that we can never describe things as they are. This was a movement that didn't try to achieve detail. But they did try to achieve the same effect that image would have on you through minimal detail, through tiny strokes. Or pointillism was the same through tiny, just thousands of tiny dots, so that when you get up close to the painting, it's like, there's hardly anything here. But then you back up, and it's the impression actually creates more.

For example, by just telling you Esau is hairy, what else is hairy? Animals are hairy. We're told he's an outdoorsman. Then he goes on in the story to behave like an animal - accumulating wives, he sees women and marries them on the spot in narrative time. The whole thing is that he's hasty and he's hungry. "Gives me this food and..." So actually, so his hairiness creates an animal primitive man impression about him. But it's just two words in Hebrew.

Jon: Small brushstroke.

Tim: And all of a sudden his whole persona has this aura of animal likeness about him. Eli, the priest Eli, being speaking to Samuel, he's old and blind. But then he is also morally blind to the horror of what his sons are doing. He's old and feeble physically, but then he's feeble because he can't stand up to his sons. So his blindness, and age, and weakness actually become his character.

The same thing - you already brought this out - that Saul is really tall and David is short. That actually describes the whole plot conflict of the Saul and David narratives, where Saul's this oppressor, but his height betrays the weakness of his character, flaws in this character.

David's short, but David shortness and radical faith and humility is exactly what allows him to be exalted to this position of power.

So Berlin's point here...actually here is a great quote from her. She says, "In impressionist art, the suggestion of a thing may be more convincing than a detailed

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betrayal. This is due to the tendency of our brains to project meaning onto images in order to complete our expectations." She's talking about impressionist art here.

"We see what we expect to see and the surrounding information guides are perception. This is why we fill in a partially drawn figure to conform to our expectations. In some cases, too much detail might destroy the image. So the trick from the artist point of view is how much detail to include and how much to omit."

Then she applies this to reading the book on narrative. "This is a good corrective for those who wish biblical stories provided more concrete details. But this is precisely its narrative technique. The gaps left in biblical narratives are intentional so that with a few deft strokes, the biblical author engages the imagination of the reader to construct a picture that's more real than if he had filled in David, or Abraham or Joseph portrait with more detail. Minimal representation can give maximal illusion." Brilliant.

Jon: Do you think that this technique was born out of the constraint?

Tim: That's interesting.

Jon: Because to write down a story, you need scrolls, which are very limited. To memorize a story, you want to keep it as tight as possible so that can be passed with some sort of fidelity. So you're constrained to be as minimal as possible. Then now, anytime you bring up a detail, it's got to be so important.

Tim: That's right.

Jon: It's like giving a painter and saying, "Paint the scene, but I'm only giving you this much ink." Right?

Tim: That's right.

Jon: And so every stroke they make is like they're maximizing that stroke. And because of that constraint, their literary genius bears out something that's very different than what we have when we don't have [inaudible 00:16:02].

Tim: That's interesting. I think we could probably list a number of different factors. So yeah, that's it. They're not typing on digital documents. They don't have infinite amounts of space.

Also, the Hebrew narrative tradition grew out of...As far as we can tell, the oldest narrative style in human literature is poetic. The epic poetic style.

Jon: Like the Iliad and Odyssey and that kind of stuff?

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Tim: Iliad and Odyssey. The oldest Canaanite and Mesopotamian, Babylonian literature the way it predates the Bible, it's narrative and that it's telling a story, but its literary form is poetry, which is hyper-condensed. Really condensed language.

Jon: And has a rhythm to it?

Tim: It has a rhythm, and certainly that was the oldest form of Israelite writing. Some of it is preserved in the Hebrew Bible. Like Exodus 15, Song of the Sea that describes Exodus. We talked about this in previous podcast conversation. Or the Song of Deborah and Barak that describes the battle.

There's different snippet quotes from these old Israelite epics. But for the most part, they've been converted into prose narrative, which is what we have before us, 43% of the Hebrew Bible.

I think that's also to the development of the narrative technique developed from a condensed form into more prose narrative. But I think it's the same challenge we come across. Just think of any biblical story that's ever confused you and I guarantee it's from some lack of detail that would unlock the whole thing for you.

Why did Moses strike the rock instead of speak to it and why does he get disqualified for that?

Jon: We don't know.

Tim: The Gospels represent a continuation of this tradition in the New Testament. The stories of the calling of the disciples, the sons of Zebedee leaving their boat, leaving their dad. There's so much more to say about that. Like, what did their dad feel like? Did he say anything? Jesus just walks up? Did he say anything else? Did he only say, 'follow me'?

We're just given the barest minimum, but also that bare minimum forces the reader to create a fuller story at the same time in your imagination as you read. It seems like that's exactly the aim of this economic storytelling style.

Jon: Is to make you do some of the imaginative work.

Tim: That's right. That has to do with how characters are described. It's very minimal. The very minimal details you're ever given; you make a lot of. Then that forces you to think, "Well, how do I learn how to evaluate characters?" Characters become important vehicles for narrators to communicate their message and they'll often speak through the characters instead of about them.

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There are different ways that biblical narratives will show you indirectly what characters are like. Names. First of all is names. And this is not something that it's very common in modern western culture, but it's almost over the top in Bible. And it's not just when parents name their children, although that is significant.

All the tribes of Israel are given their names in Genesis 29 and 30. Judah. "I praise God. I praise God for giving me a child." Judah means praise. There's lots of that going on. But many times, characters names embody their role in the story. Saul's name is "the one who has asked for." And you're just like, "Oh yeah."

Jon: They wanted a king.

Tim: They wanted to King. We've talked about Abraham as "exalted father." Israel means "struggles with God."

Jon: That's a good one.

Tim: Adam, "human," "Humanity." But then you get some that are almost too good. In Ruth chapter 1, the two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. Mahlon means "sick man," "one who is sick," and Chilion comes from the word "Chala [SP]" which means to "die or expire." And their only role in the story is they're introduced in one sentence and they die in the next sentence.

Jon: And they call them the sick one and the dead one.

Tim: Yeah. I call them sicko and done-for. If you're reading this in your language, that would be what you would hear. There's these two guys, sicko and done-for, and they die. But that's their role in the story is to die to set up the plot conflict. This happens everywhere. It's unbelievable and cool.

So the name, character's name, that's a small brushstroke that can have a huge effect on your perception of them.

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Tim: The main ways that biblical authors will evaluate characters for you is mostly just through their choices - what they do - or through their speech. This is where the minimalism of biblical narrative comes in. Instead of editorializing, biblical narrators will just think of half the scandalous things that biblical characters do. Really screwed up people.

Think of all the classic questions of like, there are all these polygamous marriages among important biblical characters. Then the question is, is God endorsing this? So

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you have to back up and you have to say, "Just because a character doesn't something in a story, doesn't mean it's been endorsed."

Look at all of the characters who have multiple spouses and just look at how the narrative shows you the consequences. It's always bad. Are you with me? That's the narrative's technique of depicting this as an extremely poor choice.

Jon: So it's not like going around saying, "This is good behavior. This is bad behavior." It's just "this person did this and now look what happened."

Tim: Now look what happened, and it's all bad. Parents who show favoritism, multiple stories about this, always bad. A good example of this art of reticence or minimalism as these scholars call it is Moses.

He goes out one day and he sees an Egyptian taskmaster abusing an Israelite, so he matches in. That doesn't produce a good result because he goes out another day and some Israelites are like, "Hey, you're the murderer. Are you going to kill me too?"

So you're left wondering, "Oh was that good? Did he do that? Was that justice or was that bad? Was that the first evidence of a bad temper," because his temper is going to come out a time or two later in the story. It seems maybe. Am I supposed to read the story of I'm striking the rock in the wilderness as another story of his bad temper? Neither story said, "And he got angry right boiled over." Though if you look at movie depictions of the Moses story, they'll always depict that as a justice moment positively.

Jon: The murder.

Tim: Yeah, that's right. As the moment where his conscience—

Jon: He stood up for the innocent.

Tim: Yeah, totally. Narratively, it's way more ambiguous than that. This is a good example. It's a little brushstroke, but unlike Esau, where his hairiness and bodies is this kind of negative evaluation of him, here, you're just left to sit with it. Then you have to watch him as a character develop, and then you have to watch other moments where Moses might act in anger, maybe - you have to make the call as a reader. This is how it works.

Abraham gives Sarah away twice because he fears for his own life. So what's this? Is this a cultural practice? Is this him selfishly saving his own skin? When the kingdom

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passes on to Solomon from David, and David says, "Follow the Torah. Be faithful to the covenant," and you're like, "Oh, yes, good father-son moment deathbed scene."

Then he gives this hit list of like, "Go assassinate this guy and take out this guy." And you're like, "Oh, what? Wasn't there that one commandment don't murder?" And so you walk away going, "Was that good or bad?"

Then Solomon goes and does this. Then the whole Solomon story. Is he a good guy, or bad guy? All the way through, this is it. So it makes the story so frustrating to read. You can experience it differently. You could experience the frustration. Just tell me the point. Am I supposed to be like this guy or Am I supposed to not be like this guy? And biblical narrators just refuse to give us things on a silver platter. It's like they force you to work for it.

Jon: Because they could have. I mean, there was nothing keeping them from telling you.

Tim: They're totally capable of saying, "And he was evil in the eyes of the Lord. He was bad."

Jon: And they've done that a time or two.

Tim: Yeah, they do it sometimes, but it's rare.

Jon: But for the most part they don't because they want you to wrestle with it.

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Jon: We still haven't really gotten to why. What is the value? Because here's the downside. The downside is you come up with a bad interpretation. You're filling in the gaps and you create a picture that they weren't intending. If that's the risk, what's the upside that makes that risk worthwhile?

Tim: I've been saving this quote for last. This is the single most important work on biblical narrative in the last long time by a Jewish scholar Meir Sternberg, called "The Poetics of the Biblical Narrative. It's absolutely brilliant. It's a long quote, but this is worth the price of the expensive book.

Jon: The price of the podcast?

Tim: Yeah, that's right. He says, "Once you realize that the Bible's anti didactic style—

Jon: Anti didactic? He doesn't use a lot of words?

Tim: No. Didactic meaning moral education. In other words—

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Jon: It's not giving lessons.

Tim: Well, moral literature, "so and so did this, that was bad, wasn't it? Don't be like that person."

Jon: The boy who cried wolf.

Tim: Yeah, that kind of thing. It's just on the surface, be like this character, don't be like that character. He calls the Bible anti didactic based on this quality. That even though it tells you all the stories of people making good decisions or horrible decisions, it never explicitly says, "Be like, this person. Don't be like that person."

Jon: Which is so funny because that's what we turn in to.

Tim: It's precisely what the modern Western Christian tradition has done with biblical narrative. And he would argue we've ruined it. Actually, you were working against the—

Jon: It does feel like you're working against it often times.

Tim: Yeah, because it forces you to fill in gaps and make interpretive decision on behalf of the story, whereas the point of that story is to make every reader do the work themselves.

Jon: All right.

Tim: He says, "Once you realize the Bible's anti didactic style is its narrative policy, you gain insight into the role of the aesthetics subtlety of these stories. They almost always shun extended commentary or exploration let alone that is sermonizing.

These authors intentionally leave gaps for the readers to puzzle over discontinuities, indeterminacies, nonsequiturs, unexplained motives. And they're fully aware of the disorienting effect this has on readers as they try to draw lessons from that." He's going to keep describing the problem - what we experience as the problem. "Biblical narrators conceal the meaning of their stories to an extent seldom equaled by any other literature in history."

Jon: Interesting.

Tim: He's a comparative literature professor.

Jon: He reads a lot of different ancient literature.

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Tim: Look at what he says. "This style literally says this style was not inherited by Israel's neighboring cultures. It was invented and elaborated in the Israelite tradition of narrative, and it's nothing less than deliberate." So in the ancient world, there's no parallel for the style and in literature ever since then. This is a uniquely biblical narrative trait. Super interesting.

Here's his take on the effect that this is designed to have. He says, "In day to day life, our day to day life, knowledge and information, the ability to understand the meaning of events is power. But in reading the Bible, we're constantly puzzling over the gaps in the story. Why did Moses do that? Why did God do that? And this is strategic.

Our puzzlement is an imitation of our real position in life. It exposes our ignorance about the meaning of history and lives. Biblical stories imitate our real-life conditions of inference as we too are daily surrounded by ambiguities or we're baffled, we're misled by appearances, we're reduced piecing fragments together by trial and error of interpretation, and we're often left in the dark about the meaning of our lives until the very end.

Jon: To the very end."

Tim: I'm so sorry. To the very end. Yeah, that's right. He goes on. "The scarcity of commentary by the biblical narrators forces us to constantly evaluate characters' motives and the meaning of the plot as we look for clues. It is only by sustained effort that the reader of biblical narratives can attain the point of view that you come to realize only God possesses all long. Making sense of biblical stories is to gain a sense of being human."

So his first point is that this minimalist style is trying to recreate in the narrative your experience of your own life. Like the same difficulties that I have interpreting why I had that conversation yesterday and what that weird thing that happened yesterday, and why I got that email and why that fender bender...

Jon: Isn't that the reason why we tell stories? Is to give clarity and coherence to events. So when we think back at the past, we tell ourselves a story and we began to tell ourselves why it was important, why that thing had to happen. Whatever it was, we tell it in the story.

And what is so enriching and wonderful about other stories is it gives us an opportunity to discover the meaning of things. That's why stories are enjoyable - a large part of the reason why stories are enjoyable.

Tim: That's right.

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Jon: He saying the biblical authors are trying to strip you from that intentionally?

Tim: Yes.

Jon: That thing you want in the story; they are keeping out of arm's length.

Tim: Or they're making you work for it and you can never be fully certain. Why did Moses kill the Egyptian?

Jon: They don't want you to know. They don't want you to fully know.

Tim: Or they want you to be left with options. He was a righteous indignation.

Jon: That's another way of saying they don't want you to know. They don't want you to be certain because, in life, we can't be certain about things.

Tim: That's right.

Jon: We crave certainty, and we don't have it so we pretend we have it. And so we tell ourselves stories and we allow ourselves to believe things we often deceive ourselves but in order to have some sort of stability. Are you saying they're trying to create some instability in you as you're...?

Tim: I think that's what Robert Alter is saying, Adele Berlin. That's what all these scholars are saying is that the large biblical narrative is constructing a very meaningful worry of our world.

Jon: The bones of it?

Tim: Yes, that's right. And how God interacts with these characters is taking them somewhere. So the fact that God is the anchor character from page one to the last page, means that there is meaning and coherence. But when it comes to the individual human characters in these stories, it's very minimalist, and their motives and the moral evaluation of many of their decisions is really opaque.

It's not transparent. And what he's saying is, because the story is trying to place us in precisely the same experience we have with our lives, that's why Robert Alter the beginning of that quote, he says, "The underlying biblical conception of people's characters that they're unpredictable."

"Abraham, why did you give Sarah away the second time? And then you start to feel morally superior, because you're like, "Oh, I would never do the same mistake a second time." And then you pause, and then you're like, 'Dang it. No, I did that thing for the fourth time yesterday.' It's both frustrating, but brilliant.

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Many times the biblical characters can seem like bumbling idiots. And you're wondering why they're doing what they're doing until you realize this is actually a fairly accurate description of my moral progress and regress on a month by month level. "Oh, yeah. Why did I yell at that person yesterday? Was that really just righteous indignation? Or maybe I was just being selfish or I don't even understand my own motives half not the time. How could I possibly hope to understand Moses's or David's?"

Biblical literature has this unique style of intentionally withholding a clear interpretation of characters.

Jon: I think it could be an argument made that some of our some of our newest storytelling techniques when it comes to TV series and stuff, is starting to embrace that again.

Tim: Yeah, it's disorienting. It's disorienting when the moral character in the story isn't clear. Is this person bad? Is this person good? Think through the biblical story. You can, on one hand, name the characters who are flawless.

You might be able to count Joseph if you discount his teenage years. Maybe. But the thing he pulls with selling the people's land and then buying...interesting. You've got maybe Joshua, but even he has a blunder with not seeking God when the Gibeonites come to him. You've got Daniel, Boaz short story, but he's—

Jon: He's legit.

Tim: And Jesus. Even Paul has a couple of moments.

Jon: Paul the Apostle?

Tim: Mm-hmm. Where he and Silas get in that argument and they can't settle it, they part ways. At least he's very humanized in that moment. The point is that the more—

Jon: It's not a lot.

Tim: There's not a lot.

Jon: And the ones you would expect like Abraham, Moses, David—

Tim: They all have whole narratives pointing out their flaws. So what's that about?

Jon: Noah.

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Tim: Yeah, totally. What's that about? You go back and reread those narratives and there are almost always multiple interpretations you can make about why they made the decisions in the first place. As a style, it's very engaging. It's realistic. It's moral realism of the human condition that most people aren't only good and only bad. We're all a mixed bag of different amounts.

In terms of literature, the novels of Cormac McCarthy, he wrote "The Road." But he did also this trilogy called "The Border Trilogy," about this cowboy character living on the US Mexico border before it was fully firmed up as a border.

People have compared his prose narrative style to biblical style, both in just the way he verbalizes these things and long run on sentences. But also the minimalist portrayal of characters and how the main character is this ambiguous and you never quite know what's going on inside his head. And that's kind of what drives the scenes is wondering what he's going to do and is he going to shoot somebody?

It's a narrative style that's in...The point is it's intentional. It's not primitive, it's not just ancient, it's very sophisticated and realistic.

Jon: And it was contained to just Israel? Like the neighbors didn't use this?

Tim: Yeah. The Sternberg evaluation, if you look at contemporary Canaanite, Babylonian, Egyptian literature, nowhere near this level of sophistication. They're beautiful poetry but in terms of this prose narrative style, it just doesn't have that.

Jon: And it's to intentionally mess with you?

Tim: Well, to engage you. I like saying mess with you because it does. It's like it leads you down a path and then—

Jon: Engage you, but a beautifully depicted character is engaging too. But it engages you by messing with you. By not giving you what you want, right?

Tim: That's correct.

Jon: You want clarity as to the person's motives and you want understanding of why did that happen?

Tim: Correct. Because the way characters work in narratives is by identification. You paint characters that the viewer or reader identifies with, and then for whatever, a screenwriter, movie director, you want your audience to connect with the characters so that their experience can map onto your own life experience to speak to you through that.

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Now we're talking about a technique where you constantly are wondering who you're supposed to identify with. Do identify with Moses? Sure. I've had moments of anger and injustice. And then you go, "Oh, but maybe he just has a hot temper and it got him into trouble. Do I have that? Probably do I not?"

So it forces self-evaluation, but through a really different way than just being like, "This person was good. Be like them? This person was bad. Don't be like them."

Jon: It's interesting. I mean, if you just think about what were the earliest stories likely about, it would probably be like, "Hey, don't eat that berry because the other day Joe ate those berries and he's dead." So it's like, "Okay, I don't want to die." Moral story. Don't eat the berries.

Tim: I suppose. Man, that's really far back there. One of the oldest literary works is the Gilgamesh Epic. It's like Homer's Iliad but predates it by millennium. And it's this really sophisticated poetic exploration of mortality—

Jon: What's the earliest story we have record of?

Tim: Exactly. That's what I'm saying. We're talking about a story that comes from somewhere between 3000 BC.

Jon: I'm going back further. I'm going back to like we're learning language. I'm like, "Okay. Language. What language you're for?" "Oh, stories." Why would I tell you a story?" "Oh, I don't want you to die."

Tim: "I don't want to eat the white berry."

Jon: "Don't eat that berry." "There's a bear over there." These are the stories we would tell. That's where it starts to get to the point where you're intentionally leaving out details just to mess with someone. You will come a long way.

Tim: Yes. It's extremely—

Jon: Which is actually making me think like, even with the way we're telling stories nowadays, and it's back to the whole thing breaking bad as a great example, and all this stuff. It's like, we are now getting more and more comfortable with making characters more dubious, more ambiguous, more complex, blurring the boundaries between heroes and anti-heroes, creating mysteries, and leaving out details that you would want—

Tim: That would be the key to understanding.

Character in Biblical Narrative

Jon: Just letting it hang and sometimes never resolve. And we have this appetite for it now. You have this palette for it. And it makes me wonder if this was such a literarily saturated people they developed the same kind of palette for like that kind of storytelling, maybe.

Tim: Yeah, that's right.

Jon: But it's not what we think we want. What we think we want is clarity. And what the best storytelling will do is what this is doing, whatever it is, which is not giving you...So your point, you back up and you get to the bones of the whole thing in the overarching narrative. There is clarity there, there's clarity of like, "God created this for a purpose. Here's the purpose. And God's going to recreate it. Here are the things that God values and all that stuff." There's a lot of clarity to those things.

But then you get into the actual story like real time of someone living life on this planet under the sun, then the clarity begins to disappear.

Tim: Two things that are relevant. One is the title of Meir Sternberg book is called "The Poetics of the Biblical Narrative." Then the subtitle is "Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading."

Jon: Ideological meaning?

Tim: Ideological meaning this is narrative literature that has an agenda with a message. It's trying to mess with you.

Jon: That's what ideological means?

Tim: Yeah. Ideology meaning a clear thought out message that it's trying to mess with you and get you.

Jon: Got it.

Tim: So literature that has a message that also reading it is itself a drama. And really is that "the drama of reading." This is why even though you think you know the story because you read the Children's Book of Noah, or whatever, you can never replace sitting down and reading it slowly from beginning to end. There's just something about that experience of biblical narrative, you can't replace it with teaching it. You'll always have to clarify and make it simpler than it actually is.

So the literature itself forces you to do the only thing with it it's meant for, which is to sit down and read it from beginning to end. You cannot replace that experience, because that itself is a drama. And that's how biblical literature is designed. Brilliant. Anyhow, that's the first thing.

Character in Biblical Narrative

Then the second thing is about how God's depicted. This is kind of landing the plane. God's the only character who unites the whole Bible. He's the only character who's on page 1 and still around on the last page.

There are a few things relevant, namely, that that tells us something. That the ultimate purpose of these stories isn't even necessarily human-centered, but that it's revealing something about God's relationship to the human story: God's character, God's identity, and God's purposes for history.

Those are all revealed in those same dramatic ambiguous ways. "Why did God do that? Why did he do the whole Exodus showdown the way that he did it? Why didn't he do it a different way? Why did he almost kill Moses in the middle of the night in Exodus 4. right before the..." All this. I mean, God's a complex character in the biblical narrative.

There's another Israeli biblical scholar who pointed this out to me. And the moment she did - her name's Yairah - it was so clear and it helped make sense of many biblical stories. She calls it the dual depictions of God. God's dual roles and biblical stories.

She just says, "Pay attention. Stories where God is super involved, like God's talking to people, they're talking back to him. God does this. Exodus story, Genesis 1 through 11, Abraham stories, these are stories where typically the human characters are less developed and they're more simplistic and their moral evaluation is more black and white either they listen or they don't listen, either they obey or they disobey, either they're blessed or they suffer consequences.

But then there are other stories where God is depicted more as a behind the scenes character - where God doesn't say a lot, but he's just said to be with somebody. Like, the Joseph story, God doesn't explicitly show up 'Dear Joseph, do this.'" But we're just told God's with Joseph a couple times, and then it's just random coincidences keep happening.

She puts it this way. This is Yairah Amit from her book, Reading Biblical Narratives. She says, "The more God is depicted as a present character commanding or testing, punishing or forgiving, the more the human characters are depicted in a flat manner in a singular type, like rebellious, obedient or sinful.

But when God is portrayed as more absent or behind the scenes, there's more narrative space for multifaceted human characters and the complexity of their motives. So the Joseph story, the David story, Esther...

Jon: Completely gone.

Character in Biblical Narrative

Tim: ...Ezra, Nehemiah, these are whole books where God doesn't show up a ton and interact just like one of the other characters. It's more occasional mentioned behind the scenes. Then those are the scenes where these really complex characters come to the surface that will force you to work a whole lot this kind of work.

That's an interesting dynamic too that God's relationship, the way God's portrayed in a story, the more he's involved, the more morally clear that narrative is. The more he's behind the scenes, the more it imitates our real life day to day experience. Which is like, "Is God got involved today? Sometimes I wonder. Sometimes I feel really confident. Those days see more clear to me. But then other days I feel like I don't know and I question my motives, I question other people's motives."

It's another one of these ways that the biblical stories imitate our day to day life experience in the journey of faith. It's brilliant.

Jon:

Matthew: This is Matthew from Portland, Oregon. We believe the Bible is a unified story that leads to Jesus. We're crowdfunded project by people like you and me. Find free videos, study notes, and more at thebibleproject.com. Also, latest episode in our How to Read series "Character in Biblical Narrative" is live on YouTube and our website now.