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## Setting in Biblical Narrative

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## Setting in Biblical Narrative

- Jon: The Medieval castles, the Swamps of Dagobah, A Haunted House, the Roman Colosseum. These are all examples of places. And when these places are used in stories, they become what we call settings.
- Tim: One of the primary vehicles of meaning in biblical narratives is when they highlight and repeat where events take place.
- Jon: I'm Jon Collins, and this is The Bible Project podcast. Today we're talking about settings. Settings are crucially important to storytellers. If a scene takes place in a creepy rundown house, you as a reader now have an expectation of what is going to happen. Some are scary. If a story takes place in the courtroom, you now expect a story about crime and justice. Settings are a big deal in the Bible: Egypt, Bethlehem, Moab, Nineveh, Babylon.
- Tim: What you're supposed to be doing, what the biblical authors assume you're doing is keeping a little tally of where every story happens. This is not unique to biblical stories. Places become symbolic and full of meaning just by nature of the things that have happened there.
- Jon: Today, we talk about the significance of setting. Thanks for joining us. Here we go. We're talking about how to read the Bible, specifically about how to read biblical narrative.
- Tim: Talking about plots - how plot, conflict, and resolution works in narratives, and then learning to read biblical narratives within these kinds of embedded levels of plot conflict. That's the first main tool that biblical authors use to tell us theological messages in these narratives.
- Jon: How the event is sequenced and [growing?] together...
- Tim: Is crucial clue to its meaning.
- Jon: The second tool...
- Tim: Is how biblical authors talk about the setting of the story.
- Jon: Where the story takes place.
- Tim: Where the story takes place.
- Jon: When and where.
- Tim: When, and where. That's exactly right. This is actually a challenge for modern readers of the Bible because many of these places that get named don't have any significance for anybody who hasn't lived in that small patch of land, the size of New Jersey that is called Israel in the West Bank. It's very easy to see the gap. What am I supposed to think of when I hear the hill country of Ephraim or the wilderness of

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Judah or Mount of Olives, or that kind of thing? One way is to book a trip and go there.

Jon: Right. Holy land tour.

Tim: Yeah, do a holy land tour, then you have a visual reference to oh, the hills of Galilee, oh, Nazareth, oh, that is kind of in the middle of nowhere up in those hills and that kind of thing. That's one way of beginning to get a sense of the significance of these places.

But actually, there's another almost more important sense where you don't have to go there. All you have to do is have a good memory as you read these texts.

Jon: What other stories happened in these places.

Tim: One of the primary vehicles of meaning in biblical narratives is when they highlight and repeat where events take place. What you're supposed to be doing, what the biblical authors assume you're doing is keeping a little tally of where every story happens.

Jon: And kind of recalling what those other stories were?

Tim: Recalling those other stories, bringing those memories to bear on the story. This is not unique to biblical stories. Every culture has its own way of doing this. Places become symbolic and full of meaning just by nature of the things that have happened there or the type of place that it is. In American culture, the White House lawn or something, or Washington DC as a city.

Jon: Or the streets of New York?

Tim: Yeah. That's right. Streets of New York, the canals of Venice or Paris.

Jon: A coffee shop in Paris, it communicates something—

Tim: Correct. And it also prime's your expectations for what you think is going to happen there. Then the storyteller can either fall into those expectations that they've created by setting it there or they can surprise you by having something happen there that's precisely the opposite of what you expected to happen.

In that sense, setting is another character, and it's a crucial way of communicating meaning. The same is true for Biblical narratives. So it's all these places. Egypt is an ominous place. And you think of Pharaoh and the conflict, and death of the enslaved Israelites and murdered children.

But then there are a bunch of stories that preceded the Egypt story that actually the way that they're told seem to assume your awareness. Like there's a story where

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Abraham goes to Egypt in Genesis Chapter 12, and it's very clear the way that story is told, it assumes that you have read Exodus story.

Even it's not just about sequence. It's once you read the Exodus story, every mention of Egypt after that, you're supposed to fill your mind. It's from page 1, every place is loaded already because it assumes that you've already read through it before and now you're on your 50th read through, and you're keeping a tally of everything that happens in Egypt as you go into it. That's basically the point.

Egypt, Moab, the wilderness, Bethlehem, Jerusalem, the Jordan River. You'll notice that almost all the most important stories in the biblical narrative take place in locations that you go to multiple times throughout the story of the Bible.

Jon: The simple point is, know where it's at and recall what other things have been happening and what your expectations are of that place?

Tim: Correct, yeah. The wilderness is a time of transition and testing just right throughout, whether it's for the Israelites or for Elijah, or for David, or for Jesus. Then you're supposed to—

Jon: For what in testing?

Jon: Transition. Usually, people enter the wilderness in moments of huge transition in their stories and it usually involves some patient trial or test that they have to wait through. Sometimes they succeed, sometimes they fail, and you're just supposed to bring that to the occasion.

The first illustration - I remember being introduced this and then I traced through for myself, it was so rewarding because it starts right in the first pages of the Bible - is east. The east.

Jon: Banish to the east.

Tim: Actually, the first mention is, God planted a garden in the east in Genesis Chapter 2. The Garden of Eden is set in the east.

Jon: In the East?

Tim: Or from the east. It's actually a translation rabbit hole or black hole there. But one main meeting from the east. Then when the humans are banished from the garden, they're banished to the east.

So from Israelites point of view, to the direct east, is the huge desert. It's the northern extension of the Saudi Arabian desert that separates Israel Palestine from the Persian Gulf, and Babylon. Essentially such a huge desert out there. To the east is ultimately you got desert and then Babylon. So they're banished to the east. Then in the narrative arc of Genesis 3 to 11, you end up going from the garden to Babylon.

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Jon: Which is in the east?

Tim: which is in the East. Exactly. Then Abraham goes the opposite direction. From the east, he wanders west. There's east and west arc. Then Abraham goes west back to the land, which isn't...If you look at the geographical locations, it's not the Garden of Eden. But in terms of just directions of the compass, it's as if he's going back to the garden. and when he goes there, it's described in Genesis 13, as—

Jon: The land flowing with milk and honey.

Tim: Yeah, totally. And like the land of Eden. Then he goes down to Egypt in Genesis 12, which is not good and then he has to come up out of Egypt. Then his descendant, Jacob ends up going east up to Aram, north, and east to get a wife. This is the Jacob's story. He's banished because he stole his brother blessing and birthright. So he's banished to the east and then he goes. Then he makes his journey back west again.

Eventually, once all of the family of Abraham acts like Jacob, they're back down south to Egypt. Then they come up out of Egypt into the land, just like Abraham. Then because they act like Jacob, treacherous, they get banished back to the east of Babylon in exile. So these big movements going down to Egypt, coming out of Egypt, going back to Babylon.

Jon: So getting bashed the east to Babylon and then going down to the south to Egypt, those are parallel ideas?

Tim: Yes. You end up down in Egypt. It's complex why you end up in Egypt. Abraham goes there because of a famine in the land. That's precisely why Jacob takes his whole clan down there. Joseph ends up down there, and so on because of the famine in the land.

Jon: And to get there, do you have to go through the Negev?

Tim: Yeah, you go through the wilderness to get there, though that's not particularly highlighted in the stories. But Israel coming up out of Egypt, that's the wilderness journey.

Jon: But that's how you would have gone down to or is there another way?

Tim: No, that's the way through the southern dessert.

Jon: You got to go through the desert.

Tim: Yeah, that's right. Then for the journey east to Babylon, and then out of Babylon, that arc happens multiple times. This is why the return from exile in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are depicted as a new exodus as they go out of Babylon.

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Jon: Because those are parallel ideas?

Tim: Yeah, they're parallel. Even though by the compass Egypt to south and Babylon is east and north, they both carry different kinds of symbolic meaning of being banished from the land. That all is very meaningful. In the Abraham stories, the Jacob story, the story about Joseph, the stories about the exile—

Jon: If you were to make a video just on that, what would that be? That wouldn't be a theme video. That would be a—

Tim: Promised land and exile is basically about that.

Jon: Okay. But I thought you said that one was also about living in Babylon and seeking the peace of Babylon and that kind of stuff?

Tim: That's right.

Jon: That would be another part of it?

Tim: That would be another layer of it. But the point is just the large narrative arc of the whole Bible has these movements, and the east is ominous, and the South is unknown. That kind of thing. But then every individual place, you know, all these things happen at Bethlehem, and they're almost always related to David or preparing you for the things that will happen in the life of David.

Jon: What's the town called where Abraham go? Herob or?

Tim: Bethel or Hebron?

Jon: Hebron. I was just in Numbers, and in the spy passage, when they go up, it calls out that they went first to Hebron. Why did they bring up that town and that's a town where Abraham came from?

Tim: Yes, exactly.

Jon: So that's why they call it out?

Tim: Yeah. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, when they tour around the land, they go to all of these places that will later become places of really significant events in the biblical story. It's on the large-scale narrative way of saying Israel story is lived out by its patriarchs and ancestors. The life of Abraham—

Jon: Is that where he was originally, Hebron?

Tim: He went to a number of places; Bethel, Hebron, Beersheba.

Jon: But then he gets called out?

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Tim: Well, then he goes south, and then he comes back, and he hangs up by the Oak of Mamre.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: But the point is, if you've read the whole Old Testament and then you come back and read the Abraham story, you're like, "Oh." And it's exactly the sequence. If you look in the book of Joshua, the order of cities that they go to in those Southern mountains is precisely the order that Abraham visits them in, in Genesis.

So it's as if the whole story of Israel is already being told in the sequence in the story of Abraham. Then his ancestors are retracing his footsteps. It has that effect in you.

Jon: Cool.

Tim: The point is, is keep a little tally of places. Moab. Anyway, Moab.

Jon: The Moabites.

Tim: Yeah, the Moabites. Where characters come from? Moab.

Jon: The only ones coming to mind is in numbers with the king of Moab. What else happens in Moab?

Tim: Well, first of all, Moab actually you first learned about it through people, not the place. So Abraham's nephew that he was not supposed to take with him - Abraham was told to leave the land and your family and your household, but he doesn't. He takes Lot with him.

Then in that choice, - we'll get into this with characterization - the narrator never sermonizes on Abraham's poor choice, but Lot creates headaches for Abraham, and headaches for Abraham's descendants. And it's after the story of Sodom and Gomorrah where Lot and his daughters flee, and then they have sex with their dad in the cave. Scandalous story.

But then the children born out of that scandal are Moab and Ammon. Then their descendants in the narrative go on to immigrate east to the other side of the Jordan. Then they're the people associated with the Moabites and the Ammonites, who become these arch-rivals of the tribes of Israel. So both place and those family lines, all emerged out of that sex scandal in the cave.

When you pick up a book like Ruth, a family from Bethlehem ends up going to the land of Moab and these Bethlehemite men marry Moabite women. You're like, "Oh, I've already been here, and it did not go well. You don't marry Moabites. You just don't do it." That's a good example.

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But then the events of Moab actually become the vehicle of redemption because Ruth, the Moabite woman, becomes the means by which - and some other means - Boaz and so on becomes the means by which God saves this family. In that case, Moab becomes a surprise redemptive place. The place of this horrible memory becomes transformed into a surprising hope. That's a good example where the author will play with your expectations.

Jon: Which is the same thing that happens in Numbers in the desert of Moab.

Tim: Yeah, that's right. God turns the curse of Balaam into a blessing.

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Jon: This almost could be an entire new series of videos, where you take characters and settings and you just do a quick little study on.

Tim: One could. I mean, you can see why now I wanted to do narrative in more than one video on how to read series. You could do a video on each plot, setting. And we haven't talked about characters yet.

Jon: Oh, yeah. Just to set them up. But then you can just do whole entire series on the different studies. Like you could do Moab.

Tim: Oh, I see. Oh, yeah.

Jon: We could do a three-minute video on Moab or we could do a three minute on Egypt or the Bethlehem or the East or Babylon or all these different—

Tim: We could.

Jon: And then you could do it with...

Tim: We're talking about video series. Do a video for each one.

Jon: That'd be a setting video.

Tim: If we're doing word setting this would be like a place study.

Jon: Yes, it'd be a place study.

Tim: It'd be cool.

Jon: It'd be cool.

Tim: Setting. Setting is narrators could create an environment for the events through telling you where. But also they construct an environment through time - how they talk about time. Because when you're watching a movie, you're in a location and you're in time moving through this sequence.

Jon: By time, do you mean like the time in human history? Or you mean...?



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- Tim: The way time is constructed. This is not a pipe.
- Jon: I was thinking about that just...I think last night I was watching an episode of something and just observing how time works, it's just something you don't think about. You can go through a lot of time but it's not jarring. When do they decide to cut scenes to help you transition from moment to moment? It's actually a pretty sophisticated technique.
- Tim: It's really sophisticated. And how transitions of time or gaps in time are communicated or if they're not communicated, the way to events that even though in the narrative world, they might be separated by 10 years, but you could place them right next to each other with a little transition sentence. And then all of a sudden, two events that you would never put together in normal life, all of a sudden, you're reading them next to each other, and they take on a whole new significance.
- Jon: Movies that mess with time are some of my favorite movies.
- Tim: Oh, of course.
- Jon: Like "Memento."
- Tim: "Memento," oh, man. Amazing. I'll never, never grow...
- Jon: "Groundhog Day."
- Tim: "Groundhog Day!" Well just Bill Murray.
- Jon: Bill Murray in general. Have you ever seen the movie "About Time"?
- Tim: No.
- Jon: Oh, you need to see it. It's great. It's like this romantic comedy time travel movie. It's one of my favorite movies because it's essentially about how to live in the present, which is a lesson I need to learn in life. But it's then couched in this really fun time travel.
- Tim: That's good. That's good. Think about more recently, "Arrival." It came out last fall.
- Jon: Yeah, that one messes with time.
- Tim: Holy cow! Because you start in what you think is one time, and then you're in real time, but then you're not sure. And you're like, "Are the flash forwards actually flashbacks?" Anyway. The way the way time is constructed in biblical narrative, it's through words. Once again, this is not time. It's ink on a page. "In the year of such and such a king and so on," that's one way to establish time.
- Like in the book of Samuel and kings, those events get strung together in sequence of the reigns of kings and so on. But then within those larger sequences, there could be "in the fourth year of his reign" and then you'll get an episode. Then the next

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story will be "and after this" or "and in those days" or "at that time," and you have no idea.

The whole Abraham narrative is designed like this. "After these things," God makes a covenant with Abraham in Chapter 15. It begins with "and after these things." You're like, "After what things? What story just happened?" Where Abraham became like a special ops covert mission soldier with 318 men and did guerrilla warfare on these alliances of Kings, he rescues lot.

Jon: He meets the Melchizedek.

Tim: Yeah, meets the king of ancient Jerusalem. And then, "after these things," who knows? No way of knowing. Are we talking about years, months, days? No clue.

For the author, it's immaterial. He wants you to read Genesis 15, and that covenant in light of the story that just happened. And who knows the time gap between them? He doesn't want you to think about any other story. He wants you to think about these stories, one after another. And once you bounce them off each other, there are all these interesting connections between them. So an author can explicitly mention time sequences.

Also, there's the difference between narrative time and the time of narration. The time of narration is the time it takes me to read the narrative aloud. You know, 30 minutes to read the Abraham stories. It's not very long. But then there's the portrayal of time within that time of narration.

Jon: How much time period had actually come by.

Tim: A great example to communicate the idea is the Gospel of Mark as a whole. The Gospel of Mark in chapters 1 to 10, which takes like an hour to read aloud, but it's 10 chapters, and it covers a period of a couple of years. The narrative markers are really sparse. It's mostly just, "and next, and then, and then." But it's a couple of years.

Then all of a sudden, you hit Chapter 11, and they just slows way down. Then you've got six chapters, so 30% of the whole overall story covers a period of seven days. Just think about the proportions. You have 10 chapters that cover like two, three years. You have six chapters that covers seven days.

In terms of speed, you feel like you're racing through the first 10 chapters. And then the moment you hit chapter 11, Jesus rides into Jerusalem and then, buuu. You can imagine it visually. Just slows, and it is just scene after scene. It all happening within like one day.

So you back up and you have to reflect. That's very intentional. What's being communicated by racing through Jesus up in Galilee, story after story after story, and then slowing things down in Jerusalem. There's a very strategic effect.

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Jon: This week is really important.

Tim: Importance it's a signal to the reader to slow down. You're already supposed to ponder every single thing, but really, really ponder these events. And what events are they? Of course, they lead up to the climax of the whole biblical narrative, which is the crucifixion and resurrection.

The way all of that, the way time gets designed and presented to you, is always representing a brilliant mind. But it's so subtle, you don't even pay attention to it. But the skillful reader of biblical narrative will learn how they reference time.

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Jon: There is the time for you to read it. Then there's the narrative time that it took. Did you say the relationship between the two will communicate something?

Tim: Give you clues. Yeah. Same with the overall design of Genesis chapters 1 to 11. Huge.

Jon: Generations.

Tim: All these many generations. That's 11 chapters. Then chapters 12 to 50 is just three generations. Same kind of thing. And then you speed up. You begin Exodus, and then like us, many generations past—

Jon: You skip a bunch of time.

Tim: You skip a bunch. You could create a little kind of visual chart or something and the key focus points are these three generations, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, crucial events happen there. We slow down time. Then we speed up time, and then we slow it down to just a sequence of a couple years from Exodus to the wilderness to Mount Sinai.

Then Mount Sinai is one year, and you're there for half of Exodus, all of it. And the first half of Numbers almost.

Jon: The important year.

Tim: Nearly half of the Torah is taken up, camped out at...that kind of thing. That just alerts you to, "Oh, these are the key events that are invested with the meaning. I'm going to discover the core meaning of the biblical stories if I pay attention to the Abraham stories, the Exodus story, the Mount Sinai story." The whole book of Deuteronomy takes place in one day. Just look at how the Torah's time—

Jon: Do you think that's the most stretched out in the Bible?

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Tim: Yeah, I think. It would be. It's presented as one speech on the day before they crossed the Jordan River. It's a whole book dedicated to one day. That's a good point. I've never thought about that in terms of narrative.

Jon: The day is recapping a bunch of history, though and reiterating a bunch of stuff.

Tim: Yeah, solid point. In terms of the whole Bible, that might be the most—

Jon: The slowest moment stretched out.

Tim: The smallest narrative time with the longest time of narration.

Jon: Literary time.

Tim: Yeah, that's right.

Jon: Because it's one speech, really not just one day. It's like one—

Tim: That's like, part of the day.

Jon: However long it takes.

Tim: Yeah, that's right.

Jon: It's real time. That's what it is.

Tim: Yeah, it's presented that way. It's literally representation of that day and that speech.

Jon: But the amount of time it takes to read it is the amount of time that was taken to have been there and listen to it.

Tim: Yeah. Good job.

Jon: There are other moments of real time.

Tim: They're strung out like that. But that would be the longest. And there are other moments that could condense. Like Paul in Athens, Greece, the speech that they give the philosophers in Athens, it takes maybe three and a half minutes to read it aloud. Surely, he gave longer speech.

Jon: It was longer than that.

Tim: But it's been condensed right to get the essence of the speech. So same kind of thing.

[00:27:57]

Jon: Then did we talk about just specific times having specific meanings?

Tim: Yeah. A subset within narrative time is explicit mentioning of time. "In the year of King so and so" or "in the fourth year of his reign." But then also, there's where

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characters will enter a moment in the story and the period of time that the event happening—

Jon: Is important.

Tim: Yeah. So periods of 40; 40 days, 40 years.

Jon: 40 days they spied the promised land.

Tim: 40 days they spied the promised land, then they...

Jon: 40 days Jesus fasts in the desert.

Tim: 40 days they wander in the wilderness.

Jon: 40 years they wander in the wilderness.

Tim: Yeah, as a consequence of those 40 days. Elijah goes to Mount Sinai for a trip for 40 days. Moses was up on the mountain, the people waiting for him for him for 40 days.

Jon: Oh, really?

Tim: Yeah. So 40 days gets associated with the period of expected waiting. There you go. Expected waiting.

Jon: Expected waiting. See, this could be another part of the series. It could be places and significant times.

Tim: Yes. Same with Noah and the ark; 40 days and 40 nights. It's almost always periods of waiting.

Here's a great example. Ezekiel calls the exile. At the end of chapter 20, he calls Israel's exiled of Babylon, he calls it Israel being sent into the wilderness of the nations. Ezekiel chapter 20. The wilderness, of course, was iconic the period of 40 years, but the exile is associated with this iconic number of 70. And that comes from an announcement by Jeremiah in Jeremiah 25. And then it gets expanded by seven in the book of Daniel. 77.

Jon: It gets multiplied.

Tim: Totally. What you have is this, even though it's 70 years of exile and 40 years in the wilderness, they are different numbers, but Ezekiel sees them symbolically, similar periods of time. Then you have all these other interesting...the ending of the book of Genesis has this interesting thing going on, where when Jacob or Israel - Jacob, the grandson of Abraham, but he gets renamed Israel - when he dies, he gets embalmed for 40 days, and then the Egyptians weep for him for 70 days.

When Israel dies, he has a 40-day transition period for his body, and then a 70-day period of mourning. Almost certainly the author's winking at us here in light of the

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wilderness, 40, and the exile, 70. His name is Israel. So this kind of thing. All these periods of time, three days and three nights that Jesus drew attention to that one. Jonah, who swallowed up in the belly of the monster for three days and three nights, he connects to that as a symbolic transition from death into life. There's an interesting poem in Hosea Chapter where the image of three days and three nights. So yes.

Again, you realize, "Oh, my gosh, I'm in the presence of Jedi Master." You know, you just thought, "Okay, well, it was 40 days. It took 40 days to embalm him, so whatever."

Jon: So they recorded that?

Tim: Yeah, they recorded that. Remember, these authors don't have to tell you anything. The biblical narrative style is extremely compact and economic. They will only include details that are relevant to the development of the story or unless they're packed with meaning. And so they'll often truncate time, stereotype time, round up, round down to do this kind of thing.

Jon: Now, it's important to distinguish this from Bible code kind of stuff, right?

Tim: Oh, totally. Yes, yes, yes. Oh, yeah. Big difference.

Jon: I don't know a lot about, but it's kind of like a Hebrew alphabet is also numbers. And if you find patterns in these numbers, there's dates, and there's always different information embedded in this. And that's not the literary genius...That's not them—

Tim: It's different. Well, biblical authors are aware of how these numbers work and they use them as time reference and as vehicles of meaning. They're engaged and really sophisticated ways of doing it., but they are ways that you can at least make a case that almost surely the author intends to this.

For example, in that story, we referenced earlier where Abraham covert operation, he takes 318 men. You're just like, "Okay, I guess that's how many many took." But then the next chapter 15, and the time reference between them is just after these things is this whole conversation and God says, "You're going to become a great nation." And Abraham's like, "I still don't have any kids."

"And the one who will inherit my house is Eliezer of Damascus." We've never heard of Eliezer or before in any other story. You're never going to hear about him ever again. So the question is, why do we bring up Eliezer? This was in early Jewish interpretation. So imagine that your alphabet has also your numbering system. When you're looking at letters you also see numbers. That's how the Hebrew Bible is for Hebrew readers. Early readers paid attention, the fact that Eliezer is the number 318.

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Jon: Oh, interesting.

Tim: Other than just it's a way the stories are paired together, and then it's invitation to, oh, are there other connections between those stories? There are interesting connections between Genesis 14 and 15. So they do that kind of stuff all the time.

The Book of Proverbs begins the Proverbs of Shlomo, and then the Proverbs don't start until Chapter 10. Then that first collection of Proverbs consists of 375 proverbs, which is precisely the numerical value of the name Shlomo - Solomon.

Jon: They knew what they were doing.

Tim: They knew what they were doing. But you can also overcook all of this. Usually, it's, if you look at the first letter of each chapter, or if you count the overall numbers or letters, then it's like, "Oh, yeah, dude, you're way beyond"

Jon: That's not what they were doing.

Tim: Also like the way that Hebrew words were spelled throughout manuscript history changes, like the number of letters in a chapter will change through history—

Jon: So if you're counting number and letters and stuff...

Tim: You are counting all that stuff. You're counting up all the letters in Genesis 1, all the letters and Genesis 2, and then those numbers spell a word. You're way over cook there.

Jon: That's Bible code and stuff.

Tim: But on the narrative level, that kind of stuff is almost certainly going on.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: That's cool.

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