

H2R P8 - Literary Styles in the Bible

E3: Why isn't there more detail in Bible stories?

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Literary Styles in the Bible E3: Why isn't there more detail in Bible stories?

Jon: Hey, this is Jon at The Bible Project. Today on the podcast, Tim and I continue a conversation about how to read the Bible. In the next two episodes, we'll discuss the Bible's design as a unique type of literature that we'll refer to as meditation literature.

Tim: The Hebrew Bible has been designed as this very unique kind of literature, kind of poetry and narrative discourse that really sets it apart.

Jon: We're all used to modern forms of storytelling, whether it's on TV, or Netflix, in modern novels, or in movies. Modern stories typically have a lot of detail. We get to learn what people look like, where they came from, the way they act, and why they act that way.

But when we read stories in the Bible, you'll notice that a lot of detail is left out, which makes Bible stories often confusing. But what if that's actually the way the ancient Hebrew authors designed these stories?

Tim: It's a glaring lack of detail in the story. And it's not even on our radar to think, maybe it's put there on purpose and intentionally placing a gap on ambiguity in the story to force me to think through why and the sort of options and then to read the rest of the story looking for clarification, or playing off different possibilities.

Jon: So today on the show, we'll talk about the difference between ancient literature and modern literature, and why lots of details in the Bible stories are often left out, and we'll use the story of Cain and Abel as an example. Thanks for joining us. Here we go.

All right. What we want to do is talk about the Bible as meditation literature.

Tim: As ancient Jewish meditation literature. We have a video coming out. The basic premise of the video is that all literature is produced by specific people who live in specific times, places, and cultures and that every culture and author will, therefore, produce a unique and different kind of literature, different practices, different communication techniques. And we take that for granted. Whatever culture you live in, you just take it for granted.

Jon: That's just the way we tell stories?

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Tim: That's the way we tell stories. This is the way we write newspaper articles. Poetry is probably the most common type of literature that presses boundaries most often. Hollywood's a great example, where there's like the standard run of the mill, "Here's the action movie. Here's the romance comedy."

Film studios know what the masses want, but then they'll also begin to introduce other things to try and push the boundaries. And then you get full on experimental films that are just too far ahead too soon.

Jon: There's not clear boundaries on types of literature, but there are generalities. When you talk about thousands of years of human history, and us being in a time in human history that's completely different than what it was like to be in Fourth Century BC in the Middle East, that's just a different time.

Tim: Yeah. Just like it was different being in, whatever, Medieval Spain during the Great Muslim kingdom.

Jon: So they created their own type of literature?

Tim: Yeah, their own type of literature. And medieval Europe, like all the really white pasty people living under the cloudy skies. The British islands back then they had a very unique, different kind of literature.

Jon: It's almost like a different flavor would be a way to think about it because they're still telling stories using the same principles of storytelling, and there's still writing poetry with the same principles of metaphor and that kind of stuff.

And logical arguments are still logical arguments but has its own distinct flavor. Like if you go and have a slice of pizza in Chicago versus a slice of pizza in New York, it's the same ingredients, different experience.

Tim: The biblical authors of that period, after they returned from the exile all the way leading up to the final collection of the Hebrew Bible, they didn't invent all of the literature in the Bible.

They received a whole bunch of material from centuries past - literature that was ancient to them from the times and the kings and David and Moses and so on. But they were the ones who brought it all together. Brought much

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older quilt pieces, but then brought it all together and arranged it. That whole tradition in the Israelite Hebrew culture has a very unique way of telling stories.

And the Hebrew Bible has been designed as a very unique kind of literature, kind of poetry and narrative and discourse that really sets it apart from all other literature. It's precisely those uniquenesses that make it really difficult for modern Western readers, I have found.

The very things that make biblical literature unique and awesome are the things that you have to learn how to appreciate because they're not natural to the way we consume stories or hear stories in our culture.

Jon: That's why I think this was so exciting to me as a video and a principal to understand. It really unlocked things for me.

We've talked before about how there are different paradigms you can bring to what the Bible is, and that we want to talk about the Bible as a unified story that leads to Jesus, where other paradigms are like, that the Bible is a rulebook or a devotional grab bag.

Those more speak to the paradigm of Scripture I grew up with. For whatever reason, that's the paradigm I brought when I would sit down with the Bible, open it up, and try to read it. I'm thinking to myself, "Either I need to find that verse that really speaks to me and then find an application out of that, or I need to find that verse that's telling me what to do with my life, and then obey."

And if it isn't really clear, it's frustrating. If there are these gaps where it's like, "Man, I there was more detail or I wish I understood this more," that just flustered me and made me feel like I wasn't doing a good job being a Christian reading the Bible.

Tim: This is a great example of the kinds of questions that you are taught to ask to shape how you view reality. If your primary question is, "I'm looking for the lesson for my life today," that has underneath it an assumption that this book was designed in such a way as to give you a lesson for your life from each and every poem and story.

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What we're trying to address is that assumption and say that the Bible is designed to shape our lives and view of everything in our behavior, but the way it's going about it's totally different.

Jon: The way it's going about it is totally different. And that's what this video is about. To understand how it's going about it brings so much freedom and excitement about engaging the Bible, for me. Hopefully, it'll be the same for others.

Tim: The basic idea that we unpack in this video, the key feature of biblical poetry and narrative, for the most part, is that it lacks the amount of detail and clarity that modern readers have come to expect in reading stories. Sometimes poetry is a little different. Let's just take narrative as our basic example right now.

Whether it's a movie or a novel, I'm used to a thorough introduction, for the most part, to the characters and the setting, what they look like, a short history of their personality and family, something. The famous examples are these massive modern classics like Tolstoy's "War And Peace" they'll go on for a whole chapter's about just somebody's dad as a way to—

Jon: And more modern literature has done that less, and it's actually tried to probably—

Tim: Become more subtle and more creative.

Jon: Yeah, more subtle. You get who this character is by what they're doing less about what you're being told about the character, which is that seems more of a Jewish trait.

Tim: Yeah, that's right.

Jon: It seems like we're pushing that way a little bit more than these classics.

Tim: That's a good point.

Jon: Because they're hard to read. Like it's hard to sit down and read five pages of backstory about a town that a guy was in. But that's the history of modern Western literature is that kind of detail.

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Tim: Yeah, lots of detail. Even just unnecessary detail in a particular scene. "Here's what the people looked like. His voice sounded like this. Address to the people standing under trees like this. Imported from here." Just details. Loaded details.

Jon: And not just those kind of details, but also that he tells us, we really want to understand why a character is doing what they're doing. Whether or not we're being told that subtly or we're being told that very plainly, it's really important for us to get into the psyche of the characters and to appreciate who they are and their point of view. You don't get a lot of that in the Bible.

Tim: I have two contrasting examples in my mind that fit on to Biblical examples of this. Because the biblical paradigm or the biblical characteristic is that it just lacks most of this detail. We rarely get a window into the thoughts of a biblical character as to why they're doing what they're doing.

We almost never hear what any of these characters look like. It's very unclear in half the biblical stories why anybody is doing what they're doing. Whether it's why didn't God...we've talked about this one many times. Why didn't God accept Cain sacrifice or—

Jon: Well, I think we should talk about Cain and Abel actually. I think that'd be an interesting way to go about.

Tim: Actually, we were thinking of making that a main example in the story.

Jon: We didn't in the video, but I think that'd be interesting.

Tim: Let's talk about it. Here's the classic biblical example of a lack of detail.

Jon: Genesis 4, Cain and Abel. Can I say before we look at this? I've been listening to this guy. He's got a podcast. He's this professor of religion up in Canada somewhere. His name is Jordan B. Peterson.

He's not like Orthodox Christian guy, but he's a professor of religion and he also studies a lot of psychology, especially the end psychology. But he has these lectures where he's talking about Genesis 1 through 4, and he loves the story of Cain and Abel.

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One of the things that he said that's really stuck with me because of the conversations we've been having is he goes, in this lecture he goes, "I don't get it. This story of Cain and Abel is so densely packed with wisdom. It's only like two paragraphs long and the story does so much and explains so much about reality."

He's like, "Everything is so purposeful." He goes, "One way to explain it is that these stories out of an oral culture had to be really packed and really precise because they're being passed on orally. And so there's this shaping, this natural kind of shaping." And he said, "Maybe that's the explanation." But then he's like, "I don't know if that explains it well enough, because this story is just too brilliant."

So he's just flabbergasted by it and it's almost like he wants to say, "It must be divine," is what he wants to say. And I think he's kind of getting at that without saying that.

Tim: Sure, sure. Which we sympathize with. I think you and I care about that a lot too with that we do have a conviction that the Bible is the divine-human word. The classic theological word for that is "inspiration" in the Christian tradition.

I think what you and I are both also convinced of is the way that that get expressed, it doesn't mean that it's a magic book that fell out of heaven and doesn't communicate the normal way as humans communicate. So we're interested in how the literary genius of the Bible is a pointer too it's the human-divine partnership.

Jon: So Peterson, he's been blown away by the literary genius.

Tim: Yeah, that's great.

Jon: Super fascinating. So Cain and Abel. What is it? It's 16 verses.

Tim: Just the two brothers?

Jon: No, just the whole story.

Tim: Oh, got it.

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Jon: Yeah, 16 verses.

Tim: That's a good point. From introduction to the brothers and then to Cain's being banished from the land, it's essentially 16 verses. But the actual story of the two brothers and what happened and the consequences of that is 12 sentences.

Jon: I promise you, we could talk for hours and hours and not get bored talking about this story.

Tim: Oh, no, there's so much going on here. It's unbelievable. There's so much going on here that has implications for the entire biblical narrative. The story is unbelievable.

Jon: And that's what we mean by literary genius. But what also is going on here is a lack of detail that you would expect. And you've brought these up before.

Tim: Adam and Eve have children. They have two sons. Then we're just told randomly this detail. Two sons: Abel and Cain. Abel was the shepherd and Cain was a farmer - a tiller of the ground. So just two random details. Why am I being told these random details? Because the whole plot conflict is going to hang on that detail.

Jon: Those are the details we do get.

Tim: Yeah. You get to random details, but they're the details only given because they matter for the plot conflict that's about to take place. Then Cain brings an offering. It's a food offering.

Jon: Because he's the farmer.

Tim: He's the farmer. Abel brings an offering, an animal offering.

Jon: Because he has the animals.

Tim: And we're told that the Lord looked upon Abel's offering, but did not look upon Cain and his offering.

Jon: My NIV says, "looked with favor."

Tim: Yeah, yeah.

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Jon: "That looked upon" means?

Tim: That's an interpretive rendering. Literally just look upon.

Jon: He looked upon.

Tim: But to say, "I look upon you but I don't look upon you," it's a—

Jon: You're cool. You're in.

Tim: It's an acceptance.

Jon: So the first question right off the bat is, why?

Tim: Yeah, why? Everything's going to hinge on why.

Jon: Cain is a farmer so he has fruit and vegetables. So that makes sense for him to give that to God.

Tim: And for Israelites, go read Leviticus. There's a whole sacrifice section dedicated to food offerings. It's a totally legit way to make an offering for the Lord.

Jon: That's what you got.

Tim: Not your; just great offering.

Jon: Abel, he's got animals so he takes some best parts of the animals and we're not told why. Why are we not told why?

Tim: Correct. It's frustrating. You can usually spot these types of lack of details in biblical narrative, because they're precisely the things in these stories where people fill in interpretations and just assume that that's what the story means because they've grown up hearing the story told with the detail supplied.

One common one in the Christian tradition has been thinking in terms of the animal sacrifice, knowing where the biblical story is going, leading to animal sacrifice. Animal sacrifices can atone, provide atonement for sin. Food offerings are never said to have that value.

Then going on to the suffering servant in Isaiah who's offering for sin offers his life offering for sin. And then Jesus.

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Jon: So somehow Cain should have known this or something?

Tim: Well, more is just saying that Abel, even if he didn't know it, is pointing forward to the fact that the Lord ultimately will look upon the ultimate sacrifice.

Jon: That's seems like a legit interpretation.

Tim: It's a way to look forward. But it is we should recognize that it's actually a lack of detail that we're filling in that makes us fill in that whole thing.

Jon: Yes.

Tim: The other question is to say, and I think this is how we need to learn how to read these narratives, is to say, "Oh, it's a glaring lack of detail in the story." And it's not even on our radar to think "maybe it's put there on purpose. Maybe somebody's messing with me and intentionally placing a gap, or an ambiguity in the story to force me to think through why and to sort out options, and then to read the rest of the story looking for clarification or playing off different possibilities and being aware of all those.

And that's the new category, I think, for many people that this narrative is so brilliant, they'll intentionally introduce something confusing to get me to participate more in the reading process. But that's one of the key features of biblical literature.

[00:18:42]

Jon: It's such a Yoda Master kind of tone.

Tim: Totally. Yeah, that's exactly it. Totally it is.

Jon: Yeah. I could just teach you what you need to know, but I'm going to create some obstacle and by you having to deal with this obstacle, you'll learn what it is I wanted to teach you for yourself.

Tim: Remember in "Empire Strikes Back" where Yoda and Luke and Dagobah and he leads them to that weird hole in the ground underneath the swampy tree?

Jon: Right.

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Tim: All he's telling Luke is to go down there. Then you wonder, like, "Does Yoda know what's down there?" Then what he sees as a vision of Darth Vader's father right on. It freaks him out, and then he thinks he's fighting Darth Vader in the hole. Remember the scene?

Jon: Right?

Tim: Anyway. It was the first movie I saw on the theaters.

Jon: Oh, really?

Tim: I was too young that it's left a deep imprint on my mind. Then he comes out and then Yoda is looking at him kind of knowingly, but also...I've gone back and watched it. He the also wonder, "Didn't Yoda know what just happened?" But Yoda seems aware.

So he leads Luke down this path and Luke thinks, "I don't know. Who knows what's going to happen down here?" But actually, he's being led there by the master to have an experience accept laid there for him or that Yoda knows it's going to happen. It's like that.

Jon: Totally. It's like paint the fence kind of move. The Karate Kid. You think like, "Oh this is just as chore and what—

Tim: What a weird story? Gosh, these stories are weird.

Jon: They are so weird these gaps here and now I have to do all this extra work. And all of a sudden you realize, "Oh, I just mastered the move that's going to win me the karate battle." That's what they them, right? Karate Kids.

Tim: Right here's the detail. It's a crucial plot detail. Why did God look on Abel's offering but not Cain's? The point is that the story doesn't say.

Jon: The assumption that we typically bring is the story doesn't seem complete. It's just kind of weird but I'm going to have to figure it out and it's little frustrating. Versus the assumption being "I think the story is doing something on purpose for me to have to stop and wrestle with this."

Tim: Because what's going to go on is that the whole story is not going to be about God as such. It's going to be about Cain and his decision. The focus of

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the story is on how Cain responds to what he perceives as divine neglect or divine lack of favor. It's asking you the reader to sympathize with that.

You, the reader, are experiencing the same lack of knowledge about God's intentions that Cain experi...You're put in the viewpoint of Cain. Then all of a sudden, you're emotionally stirred up over the same thing. You're supposed to empathize with Cain because we all have...Everybody...

Jon: Yeah, you've had this experience.

Tim: ...if you believe in God—

Jon: "Why isn't God looking in favor on me? What I'm I doing wrong?"

Tim: "Why is this happening. Why is this negative? What did I do wrong? I don't know what I did wrong." So the author is inviting us actually into that confusion and then now observing canes response as a way of well here's one way to respond.

Jon: And Cain's response is he's angry and his faces downcast, which means just sad, right? Is he angry or sad?

Tim: There's so much going on in the verbal texture of this book. It literally says, "His face fell," versus the phrase "for God looked upon the offering" is God regarded it but He didn't regard Cain. So Cain's face fell.

Then God asked, "Cain, why has your face fallen? Why are you angry?" Then verse 7 is key. "Isn't it true if you do well, you'll be lifted up? You'll be regarded. If you don't do well, sin is ravenously crouching at the door and its desire is for you, but can rule over it."

I mean, really verse 7 is we universe in verse 7. But the idea is that his face has fallen and if he has the choice, he can be lifted up if he wants if he does good.

Jon: Does well?

Tim: Yeah. But literally, it's the Hebrew word for "good."

Jon: The same one in the garden?

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Tim: That God repeated in Genesis 1 and 2.

Jon: Got it.

Tim: So it's inviting us back to the tree of knowledge of good and evil and the trust issue there. If you choose good, which means to trust God's wisdom and goodness even in a moment where I can't see—

Jon: What's confusing and I don't know why.

Tim: Yeah. So his face has fallen. It put everything in the story, it's all built up to a moment of a human. What decision are they going to make regarding good? It's Genesis 2 in the tree.

Jon: Yeah, that's what was so fascinating is once we started unpacking this and talking about how confusing the story is, and all stuff, and then realizing this is a retelling of the fall.

Tim: The choice of Adam and Eve.

Jon: When you start to see those parallels, it just starts to unfold on you and it starts to take so much more depth and meaning and interest of like, "Oh, this isn't just about two dudes who were early humans telling us like, 'hey, do a certain type of sacrifice, and then also don't murder people.'"

It's telling us something so much deeper about the human condition and about how we were meant to be dependent on God, and his definition of good and evil. And when we don't, the repercussions of that and what it looks like to fight against that. We get one picture of that with Adam and Eve in the garden and the snake and the banishment. And now again, with this decision with evil, it's no longer a snake. Now it's sin.

Tim: It's the first time the word "sin" appears in the Bible.

Jon: It's not a snake; it's just this abstract sin.

Tim: It's set in front of him as two paths. You can do good, which means to...Like, "Listen, I don't hate you. I just..."

Jon: "Just do good."

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Tim: "Yeah, do good. I looked on your brother's offering and not yours. You don't have to let it ruin your life. Move forward."

Jon: That's so weird.

Tim: But still, the story's planting still has that ambiguity. Even when I don't know why something bad is happening, I have a choice for how I'm going to respond. I could continue to just trust God and do good or the other possibility is depicted as a wild animal that wants to eat me up: anger, resentment, bitterness.

Jon: But it's defined as sin.

Tim: Then all of those, that choice to choose the way of resentment, bitterness, and anger is personified as a wild animal crouching at your door. And what is the thing? It's called sin. Failure. Moral failure.

Jon: And its desire is to have you, but you must rule over it.

Tim: So this is the Genesis 3 temptation all over again, but now developed and made more personal. It's putting a more realistic setting to our day to day life experience of family and things going wrong in my family that tempt me towards bitterness and resentment. And I can choose to overcome that and choose a better way or I can give into it and let that start to eat away of my humanity and make me do destructive things. Who doesn't know that story? We all are living that story every day in our families.

All of this begins with a weird absence in the narrative, which is, why didn't God look on Cain's offering too?

[00:27:23]

Jon: I think what's important to realize as it relates to this conversation on the Bible as a meditation literature is how did we get there? We didn't just skip through and be like, "Oh, that's frustrating there's lack of detail. Let's just try to pull out an application and move on."

Tim: Yes, that's right.

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Jon: We said, "Okay, I think we're supposed to pause, we're supposed to slow down, we're supposed to observe every detail we are given, and then wrestle with the detail we are not given.

Tim: Exactly. Notice and wrestle with the things that we feel like should be in the story to make it clear, but aren't there.

Jon: Then as we do, what we end up seeing is that this story wasn't written in a vacuum. The story was written with the entirety of God's divine wisdom and God's word in mind. Genesis 2.

Tim: You're meant to read backwards, so to speak. We now go back and reread the story of the garden in light of the Cain narrative and you'll notice more things.

Jon: That's so interesting. It is right off the bat. If you're just starting on page 1 of the Bible, you read Genesis 1, then you read Genesis 2, you'll probably reread Genesis 1 in light of Genesis 2. Then you read Genesis 3, and you see the fall, and you can then go back and reread everything. It's just like this reading forwards and then reading backwards again.

Here we are in Genesis 4, the story of Cain and Abel. What it's really forcing us to do is to go back and say, "Now do you see how this is all shaping together?" And not only do the first four chapters of the Bible do that, the entire Bible does that.

Tim: Let's pause real quick here. John and I walked into the recording room, I had two new books on my desk. It's a Hebrew Bible nerd named Jerome Walsh, who wrote two great books on reading biblical narrative. It's called "The Old Testament narrative" A Guide to Interpretation." Thrilling title. It's going to be a best seller I'm sure.

He has a whole chapter on what he calls Gaps and Ambiguities in the Narrative. This is one of the most basic techniques of biblical authors. He describes it as a device that narrators use to layer multiple meanings within a single text.

"Perhaps more than any other technique, intentional gaps and ambiguities offer the reader room to collaborate with the narrator in the creation of the

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story. But that means, as we shall see, the narrator also permits different readers to realize the story in different ways based on their background knowledge."

In other words, the narrator will supply the reader with the potential for many variant stories, and it is ultimately the reader who will determine which of those variants to discover and actualize." In other words, these stories are created to be so dense that you will almost never read it and interpret it quite the same because each time you go back and reread it, you'll have had different life experiences and ideally you'll have read and thought about the Bible more, and you'll come back and notice more and different things.

Later on, he says, "What effects do these ambiguities have that a more complete or straightforward way of writing would achieve?" He says, "At least two." The first is fairly obvious. "These kinds of gaps and ambiguity require the reader to put in a lot of effort in making sense. That is, to create the meaning of the story in their own mind."

Jon: You're participating.

Tim: "This increases the investment of the reader in the story - it makes you work for it. It also makes the story that results in some measure a reflection of each reader's unique, personal approach to the story."

The second effect, we can sum up in a phrase called Seeing Double. "Gaps and ambiguity is require the reader to consider multiple interpretive possibilities for understanding a text. When multiple ways of filling in a gap or resolving an ambiguity are seemingly compatible with each other the effect is a layering of meanings.

And as you read - and this is crucial point - you will have thought of many possibilities of the meaning of the story. And even those that you reject you cannot forget that."

I think the point is, is the moment you say, "Why didn't God accept his offering?" Well, it could be this. God hates Cain. It could be God loves Cain, and He's trying to teach him a lesson. It could be God loves animal sacrifices more than foods sacrifices. All those might occur to your mind. Then you're

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asked to hold all of them together and keep reading. Then you go down through the story and God really invites Cain in this intimate conversation.

Jon: God is so generous in this story.

Tim: Next, God hates Cain. That doesn't make sense. But you have been forced to think through it and answer it for yourself. Then you keep reading. And so does God love animal sacrifices more? Well, that doesn't seem to be the point either as such. And so it's a way of the storytellers inviting you to participate in the story.

But also that going through that process of it could mean this, this or this—

Jon: What does he mean by multi-layered meanings, though? Because that's starting to sound kind of postmodern like, it can mean whatever you want it to mean.

Tim: But this is what we talked about in the video. It's, this is a potential liability of this style of writing.

Jon: The liability, this style of writing is I go, "Oh, there's gaps cool filament with my understanding of the world."

Tim: That's an actual risk that the biblical authors take in writing in this dense, economically worded lack of detail type of style. That is a risk that they take. The history of biblical interpretation shows that sometimes those risks can have negative effects.

Like, within the story, the whole thing, later on, the story about the mark of Cain, and there's some just horrific interpretation that have had terrible consequences in human history. Because there are some interpretations that think the mark is a form of darkening a skin color. Then people use this story to legitimate all kinds of horrible racism and slavery. And there's nothing of that in the text. But it's an ambiguity - what's the mark on Cain.

Jon: That's the liability.

Tim: That's a liability. The advantage is that forces you the reader to say, "Oh, there's way more going on here. What it does is you have to think of multiple

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interpretive answers, and then hold them intention and mix them off the list as you read through the story.

This is a case actually, where I think the key question that you begin with, "Why doesn't God accept Cain's sacrifice" is never answered in the story. That itself is significant.

Jon: atheists'?

Tim: Because of what we talked about earlier. The lack of knowledge is a technique that biblical authors often use to put you the reader into the place of the characters.

Jon: Because how often does that happen in your life where you're just like, "I feel like God isn't looking with favor on my life. Why? I don't know why."

Tim: Correct.

Jon: And I can get angry, and frustrated, and my face can be downcast, and then that can open up this avenue for sin who's sitting there just crouching and waiting just like a hunter. Isn't the phrase about some sort of—?

Tim: It's lying, and wait to trap or attack.

Jon: Kind of like what animals do?

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Like what a lion would do?

Tim: Yes.

Jon: And that's what it's happening. And I open the door, and now it's there. This verse is saying, "It desires to have me. It's waiting for that window, and as soon as I open up and I get frustrated, and I decide that life isn't fair, and I'm going to get bitter about something, it's like, "Here's my moment. I'm going to devour you."

Tim: Now, that's an extremely profound statement and observation on the human condition and life. But to get there, you have to sit and think about this story over multiple cups of coffee and tea and take a walk.

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Jon: You got to meditate.

Tim: You have to meditate on it. Then you realize every single story is like this. Both that it's a deep well just waiting for you to do the effort to lower the bucket and bring it all the way back up through this process of asking questions and thinking through the story over and over again. That's just dealing with the story by itself or the poem by itself.

Then it's reading forward...

Jon: Reading the rest of the Bible.

Tim: ...in light of that to see how the later story is going to answer it. And it's reading backwards. "Now that I've been given this story, how am I supposed to go back and reread the stories that came before it?"

Jon: Like the Genesis 3 story?

Tim: Yeah. So just that little repetition of the Hebrew word "good" in the story, makes you go back and like, "Oh, that was a major key idea wired in the earlier story."

Jon: You used the metaphor of hyperlinks, which I like.

Tim: Yeah, that's right.

Jon: Because we're just used to the fact that on the internet, things are linked together by these hyperlinks. Like Wikipedia, for example, if you're on Wikipedia and you're reading an article and then someone name's in the article and it's underlined in blue, I mean, you can click on it and get to an article about them. So it's a way to reference other pages on the internet.

You never read the internet from the beginning to the end. That's impossible. There is no beginning and no end. The Bible on as a story. It has a beginning and it has an end. But it also has hyperlinks that bring you from one place of the story to the next to go, "Do you see how this is connected?" And it's by the use of repeated words, repeated phrases, repeated ideas that are all referencing each other. And really any good piece of literature is doing this I suppose.

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But the fact that a piece of literature that was written over thousands of years by many different authors and then put together, that's doing it in such a dense and beautiful and a way that shows so much genius, that is very remarkable.

Tim: It sets the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament apart from all other world literature is just this universe unto itself. Here again, Jerome Walsh has a good statement on this. He says, "Interpretation of biblical literature should not limit itself to a beginning to end linear reading of the text." So kind of like watching a movie.

Jon: Don't limit yourself to that.

Tim: Yeah, don't limit yourself to that. Just start with it and do that regularly. Read stories from beginning to end. Do it because that's the way we experience time and life. So don't limit yourself to that.

Also, do this. He calls it intratextual comparisons of corresponding elements and stories and details. What it means is, each biblical story and also biblical poems are also designed with these hyperlinks of key repeated words or key images or metaphors that make you think of other stories that share those same words.

Jon: It's referencing other stories.

Tim: Yeah. And when you do that, it says, "This offers fruitful additional avenues for discovering deeper and more complex levels of meaning. For a reader, this implies that a single reading will not exhaust the riches of a profound text. Repeated probing, changing your questions, varying your viewpoints are all necessary to explore the depth breadth of the complex biblical narrative." In the end, the point is, it's been designed this way.

Jon: I think that's important to remember is that the authors of the Bible wrote this way. They were so entrenched in the stories that came before them that this was the language that they used and these were the technique that they used. So it's not like we're saying, "Oh, cool. Let's turn the Bible in some sort of Bible code thing."

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Tim: And by meditation, we don't mean that, "let's just get lost in our mystical imagination and then read all of that in the Bible."

Jon: Yeah, create some weird, like, "Oh, when the Bible says Eden, it means this is, and when it says, blue, it means..."

Tim: Whatever. What we're saying is, these authors were so brilliant that they actually designed the whole Bible as this deeply interconnected, densely packed literary statement and theological statement.

Jon: And you just say that in and of itself, and that's like, "Cool, they're literary geniuses." But then if you take a step further and go, "But how did they do it in such a way that not only is so genius and beautiful, but also then speaks so deeply to the human existence and then can give us confidence about what it means that we're here and why and the way to live and the reality about God? How did it get all that right?"

What the Bible say is, "Well, it wasn't just literary genius. It was God's divine Word as well." And that's another step you would have to take as a Christian. But you don't even have to take that step to start letting this mess with you.

Tim: Yeah, that's right. I mean, that's why the Bible has been compelling to centuries, millennia of generations. All kinds of different cultures and people, it's utterly unique kind of thing that works on you no matter what your religious convictions are, if you allow it to.

We've had this conversation before, I don't remember in what podcast. But the Bible, you will only experience it to the depth that you assume it speaks.

Jon: Oh, the Yoda example.

Tim: Yeah, the Yoda example.

Jon: There's some weird green weirdo.

Tim: You're like, "These are primitive." This the famous kind of dismissal in a lot of the new atheists' writings. You have Dawkins and Hitchens and so on of just the Bible is just primitive literature produced by sheep farmers and this kind of thing. It's like, "Okay, if you can't do with that expectation, then that's about all you're going to see."

Literary Styles in the Bible E3: Why isn't there more detail in Bible stories?

Actually, it's very similar to the way Jesus used parables. It is very similar. For those who have ears to hear, they'll see that these...

Jon: It makes it easy to dismiss

Tim: ...these stories about birds and treasure and seeds and soil. What's this guy talking about it's just stupid.

Jon: Weird riddles.

Tim: But for those with ears to hear, they'll see that there is a universe of depth and meaning and reflection on the human condition in these stories and these poems. And so you'll find what you're looking for.

Jon: Thanks for joining us on this podcast episode. If you liked this show, we have lots of other resources on our website, thebibleproject.com, on our YouTube channel, youtube.com/thebibleproject. These resources are free because of people like you generously supporting us. So thank you.

We'll be back next week with part two of this discussion. Thanks for being a part of this with us.