

Dr. Dave Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Lecture 13, Narrative Criticism

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When thinking about literary criticism in the Old New Testament, we looked at some of the characteristic features in the last session of literary criticism, and the primary point to try to get across is that literary criticism is a text-centered approach that traditionally has found meaning located in the text itself, at times bracketing historical questions as far as authorship and sources and forms, and the historical context, and even the external world outside of the text, in exchange for focusing on the world in the text, and looking solely at the text and its structure and its inner workings as a determinant of meaning. And we looked at a number of examples in the Old and New Testament as far as what kinds of questions a literary approach might ask, and what types of conclusions and results might come about from that as well. To give one more example, we ended by looking at the parables as an example of how literary criticism might work in analyzing the parables as fictional literature, and analyzing it in terms of the structure of the parables, and the characters and main features within them.

But to give one more example, interestingly, to go outside of narrative and look at an example from an epistle, one individual named Gustav Freytag has suggested that Romans chapters 1 through 8, to use an example from Paul's letters, Romans chapters 1 through 8 that we usually analyze as a letter or an epistle. Freytag has suggested that we can break Romans chapters 1 through 8 down into a five-part drama. He analyzes Romans from the perspective of a drama, and he suggests, for example, that chapter 1 verses 16 and 17, what we usually consider as the kind of the theme of the letter, where Paul introduces justification by faith, he suggests is sort of the inciting action, the initial action of the drama.

And then in chapters 1, 18, all the way through chapter 4, verse 25, he sees as the increasing tension. And then chapter 5 is the climactic turning point of the narrative. And then chapter 6 and 7 is the falling action.

And finally, chapter 8 is the resolution of the drama. So Freytag sees Romans chapter 1 through 8 as being able to be analyzed not just according to the common conventions of a first century letter, but he analyzes it according to a drama. One interesting feature of his analysis is the suggestion that chapter 5 is the turning point of the letter.

Some modern day outlines of Romans sees a new section beginning at chapter 6, with chapters 1 through 5 dealing with justification, and 6 through 8 dealing with sanctification. But according to this analysis, chapter 5 is the main focal point, the main point begins a new section of Romans chapters 1 through 8. In contrast to some that see chapter 3, or perhaps chapter 8 as the main section and point of the letter. And so this is one example of an attempt that in some respects is very intriguing and compelling of applying dramatic literary elements to a New Testament epistle.

So having looked at a number of approaches, literary approaches to Old New Testament text as examples, let me in conclusion just to mention a couple of issues in applying literary analysis to biblical text. First of all is the issue of imposing modern structures, or simply imposing structures and categories on the ancient text that may or may not belong. Certainly it's not unobjectable in and of itself, but still our understanding, our literary analysis of the text must be grounded in the text itself, and rather than imposing a structure or imposing categories on the text that really don't fit and don't work.

So number one, be aware of imposing, or those who impose modern structures and categories on ancient text. Any structures or categories must be grounded in the text itself. A second issue to be aware of is the danger of ignoring the historical and theological dimensions of the text.

As we've seen, sometimes literary criticism tends to bracket or even jettison historical issues or historical questions related to authorship and the historical cultural background out of which a text was produced, issues of referentiality outside of the text, especially for Christians who claim that the Bible records God's redemptive activity in history and dealing with people in historical context and revealing himself in historical acts. Historical and theological questions cannot be ignored. So literary criticism has much value in that it deals with the text itself, in that it forces us to pay close attention to the text rather than hypothetical reconstructions behind the text or focusing on our own theological agenda.

Literary criticism allows us to encounter the text in new ways. It allows us to be in touch with the text itself, but at the same time we need to be aware that it's simply one facet of the hermeneutical enterprise in that historical and theological questions must also be considered and cannot be ignored. Now, one perhaps subset or facet of literary criticism more specifically would be narrative criticism.

Narrative criticism, again, is the study of a narrative text, a story from the standpoint of the kinds of questions that one would ask of any narrative literature in literary type studies, such as asking the question of what the plot is of the story or asking questions about the characters, how the characters are portrayed, how they develop, how they interact with each other, asking about things like story time as opposed to narrative time, or asking questions about the point of view of the narrative. These kinds of questions have also been applied to biblical text. For example, one common explanation of the text from a narrative standpoint is to talk

about, instead of traditional categories of the author, the historical author, and the circumstances, and who are the readers, is to frame it in terms of the narrator and the text.

The voice in the text not necessarily referring to the historical author, but who is narrating the voice of the text itself. And then the narratives, those who are hearing the text, that is, the person that is to identify with the person who is being told the story or the narrative. Things like point of view, the point of view would be the perspective that the author takes on the events, what is the perspective of the author as he tells the story, as he narrates the events.

And then one of the more interesting ones and significant ones is the plot of the story. Most narrative, in terms of narrative criticism, narrative is usually seen as moving along a plot that begins with the introduction or the setting that introduces one to the main characters, it introduces one, it's the inciting action of the story. The next element beyond the introduction or the setting would be the conflict or the crisis in the text that third then causes a rising tension, there's a rising tension in the text and the story that then reaches a climax, which then experiences a resolution.

The resolution then brings about a solution or resolution to the the rising tension that was created by this climax or this crisis. And then the conclusion that simply draws together all the loose threads and brings the story to its proper end. And so Old and New Testament narratives in particular then have been studied from the standpoint of the literary workings of the text.

And again, asking some of these questions about the narrator and the narratives and the plot of the story and the characters, how they develop and how they are presented, how they interact with each other. And again, sometimes at the expense of bracketing historical questions and historical concerns as well, though again, that's

not necessarily the implication of this method, but often accompanies it. Once again, let me give you some examples of the usage of narrative criticism in analyzing biblical texts.

First of all, to give an Old Testament example, let me give you one from Genesis chapter 22, the well-known Akedah, the sacrifice of Isaac, the attempted sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham, chapter 22, 1 through 19. And as the story goes, God comes to Abraham and asks him to take Isaac and present him as a sacrifice. And Abraham does that.

He takes Isaac up into the mountains and Isaac himself wonders where in the world are we going to find, where's the sacrifice? We have the wood, we're all ready to go. Where's the animal for sacrifice? And Abraham ties up Isaac and puts him in the altar and is ready to let the knife fall. And an angel, the voice of the and God provides then a ram for the sacrifice.

And that is the story concludes there. One can analyze this according to the narrative technique of especially plot. For example, the exposition or the setting is found in chapter one, where the narrator clearly indicates God's intention to test Abraham.

So this entire story at the very outset is intended to indicate that God is testing Abraham in the rest of the story. The crisis arises in verse two, where God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. Now, to most of us, that might not seem like a crisis, except for the fact that we might interpret the crisis more existentially or psychologically.

That the difficulty is Abraham is being called to execute his own son. And how would we feel if we were called upon to take the life of one of our children? So we see this problem as mainly a sort of an existential one, which no doubt it had some of those

dimensions. But when you look at the broader context of Genesis, the primary difficulty here is this is a threat to God's promise.

Isaac is not just Abraham's son. Isaac is the promised seed, the continuation of God's promise. And now Abraham is being told to kill the promise of this story.

The crisis is a threat to the very promise of God. The rising tension occurs then in verses three through ten, where Abraham responds in obedience. He is going to go ahead and kill the promise.

And again, even Isaac asks about the ram that's going to be slaughtered. Where is the animal to be slaughtered, which makes the story even more intense. And the tension rises to the point that Abraham has the knife raised above his head.

And then comes the resolution in verses 11 through 14, where God stops Abraham from dealing the death blow and then provides an animal to be sacrificed. And then in verses 15 through 19 is the conclusion. The promise to God, God's blessed promise blessing to Abraham is reaffirmed.

And then the story comes to its conclusion. That is more of a micro level, just one section of the book, even entire books could be analyzed according to typical narrative structures, such as this exposition or setting, a crisis, followed by rising tension that reaches a climax, a resolution to the tension, and then finally the conclusion of the narrative. One can also analyze Old Testament characters in a variety of ways.

Some narrative critics have expressed interest in classifying characters as to whether they are round characters that get developed fully, even discussing their physical characteristics, and even their psychological characteristics, or whether they're flat characters that don't get much development at all, whether they're comic

characters. By comic, we don't mean necessarily that they make you laugh, but comedy, meaning that the story has a happy ending, or the story has a positive ending in terms of the character, or whether the character is a tragic one, that is where the story takes a downturn, the character meets a negative or a tragic end, or again, whether the character is a main character or a peripheral one. Scholars have shown interest in analyzing characters according to those perspectives, and then how the characters relate to each other, whether a character is a foil, for another one, for example, in the the story of Elisha, the Elisha narratives in the Old Testament, is most, some scholars have characterized Elisha as a round character, a round figure, because he's described, and because he develops rather than being static.

Saul is often deemed a tragic figure, in the, in the story, in that Saul, Saul's career seemed to have an upward turn, but in the end takes a tragic downturn. In the story of, the so-called story of David and Goliath, when you read the narrative more carefully, the real, the real conflict is not between David and Goliath, the real conflict is between David and Saul. Goliath seems to be a foil that both David and Saul confront.

Saul, clearly, as the king of Israel, and in charge of the army, Goliath is Saul's problem, and Saul does not know what to do. Saul is portrayed as, as responding in fear, and not knowing what to do, but when David confronts Goliath, with God's help, David slays the arch enemy of Israel. So Goliath is mainly a foil to highlight the true conflict between David and Saul, and so the real, the real story is not about David and Goliath, it's about David and Saul, I think.

So one could look at a number of Old Testament texts, and apply, apply characteristic, the characteristic methodology of analyzing it in terms of common narrative features, again, such as plot, and characterization, and point of view,

narrator, and narratee, etc. The New Testament, again, to give a couple of New Testament examples, we've already looked at the parables, so I don't intend to go into any more detail, necessarily. But again, a lot of fruitful narrative work has been done in analyzing, especially sections of or entirety, entire gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

But even parables, again, we've said could be analyzed according to their plot, whether, you know, whether they have one main character, or two, or three, and how they interact. Parables have often been analyzed according to the U-shaped plot, whether they are comic, that is, the plot takes a turn up, or whether they're tragic, the plot takes a downward turn. Several have analyzed parables according to that perspective.

One of the earlier attempts to apply narrative criticism, or analyze the gospels from a narrative or story perspective, was an interesting book that has been updated, but was produced by two individuals named, their last names of Rhodes and Michie. They produced a gospel, a book called *Mark as Story*. And what is interesting about this book, it's co-written by an Old Testament scholar, and a liter, an English literature professor and scholar.

And they demonstrate that Mark is a consistent story, with a consistent plot, and with characterization, and again, they apply some of the same methods of narrative and story analysis to the gospel of Mark. The gospel of Matthew could be seen as developing along the lines of growing hostility. There seems to be a rising tension or a plot that emphasizes the growing hostility between the religious leaders and Jesus himself.

Beginning all the way back in chapter two, where Herod tries to stamp out Jesus, from that point on, the plot increases and the tension develops, as again, the

religious leaders increasingly become more hostile towards Jesus. And the narrative of Matthew seems to be structured, among other things, to emphasize this. The gospel of John, in the gospel of John, Jesus functions, obviously, as the primary protagonist, or sort of the hero of the gospel.

And the rest of the story has to do with how Jesus interacts and relates with a number of other people. Jesus is portrayed as interacting and relating to God himself. Jesus is portrayed as interacting and relating to the disciples, and interacting and relating to the Jewish leaders, and other minor characters, including Satan himself.

The gospel revolves around the responses of the different characters, whether acceptable or unacceptable to Jesus. And so Jesus' character is spelled out in relationship to his interaction with other characters in the gospels. And then it draws attention to the differing responses, especially in a section like chapters seven and eight and nine of John, the different responses of Jesus, that call the readers to align with, asking the leaders to align with appropriate responses, in light of the consequences of those responses.

So one can examine the characters of the gospels. At this point, I'll slow down and talk about that just a little more, in terms of demonstrating how a couple of the characters function in the gospel of John. Actually, both of them are relatively minor characters.

And the first character that I want to discuss is probably the most minor character, or at least gets the least attention in the gospels, and doesn't appear to play a significant role. And that is the character of Barabbas, who actually occurs in all three gospels. But it's interesting, the role he plays in John.

And one of the ways to examine characters in literature, especially in the gospels, one of the ways to examine characters, I think that is helpful, is to examine their function in the broader discourse by noting what role the author gives them grammatically in the text. That is, to ask questions like this, is a character, first of all, does a character play a significant role throughout the entire work? Or does the character only emerge in one place? Does the character emerge all throughout the gospels, such as Jesus, or the religious leaders, or the disciples, are obvious major characters and major players in the gospels? Or does a character only emerge a couple times in specific places in the gospel? Second, when the character is mentioned, how is the character referred to? Is the character the subject, the main actor, the subject of verbs? Is the character presented as actually performing the action of verbs? Or is the character only the object? Is he acted upon by someone else? He never does his own action. If he is the subject of a verb, is he the subject only of verbs of being that identify him, like Barabbas is, or Barabbas was an insurrectionist, or Barabbas was a robber? That word was is not an action he performs, it's simply identifying who he is.

Or again, is the actor a subject of a verb of action, of activities? Is the actor actually doing something in the narrative? Or again, is the actor only referred to as, again, an object of a verb, or as a modifier of something else? Is the actor, again, is the actor merely referred to in the speech of another individual, as opposed to being an actual participant in the narrative? And again, what kind of actions are associated, or is the participant or the character associated with action types of verbs? Are they doing things, or are they only being linked with a verb that identifies who they are? Adding all that up, one can begin to understand what role the person plays. And Barabbas is mentioned. You find Barabbas mentioned only a couple times in the gospels, in the gospel of John.

And what is interesting is very little is said about him. And we find in verse 40, in verse 40, when Jesus is on trial, he is asked by, the crowd is asked by Pilate, do you want me to release the king of the Jews, who is Jesus? And verse 40 is the response of the crowd. They shouted back, no, not him, give us Barabbas.

And then the author says, now Barabbas had taken part in a rebellion. Now this is a little bit easier to tell as far as the function. Number one, you'll notice that Barabbas never occurs anywhere else in the narrative.

But furthermore, notice how he's referred to. First of all, he's the object of the verb give. And second, when Barabbas is a subject, he's the subject of a verb of being.

He's simply identified the Greek text. Actually, he says, now Barabbas was a rebel or a robber. There's different ways to translate that.

But the point is, Barabbas doesn't seem to do anything. He's not developed. He's not an actor in the narrative.

He's only mentioned by way of identifying who he is. And he's only mentioned as the object of a verb. So in conclusion, Barabbas does not appear to be a significant person in the narrative.

Instead, he probably stands as a foil. Number one, to further emphasize the innocence of Jesus, that the crowd would prefer an insurrectionist or a robber, a rebel, that they would prefer him to be freed over Jesus, whose innocence is clearly demonstrated in chapter 18. So the irony is they would prefer the death of an innocent person over someone who is an insurrectionist or rebel.

But second, Barabbas also seems to, by calling him an insurrectionist or a rebel, the difficulty then is the crowds then, by asking for his release, seem to fall in that same

category. That is, they now also become involved in this illegitimate plot. They also become involved in what is an illegal activity.

So not just Barabbas, but the followers or the crowds now participate in this. So when you look at chapter 18, the pilot and the crowds and Jesus seem to be the main characters. Barabbas then is a rather minor character that again, only emerges in this section, doesn't play any role as far as performing actions.

He's actually the object of a speech. He's embedded in a speech. And then even in that speech, he's the object of a verb.

He doesn't do anything. And then when John says, when John mentions his name again, simply to identify his character. So by looking at characters and how they seem to be referred to, the different participants, how they seem to be referred to in a text, says much about how the author sees them functioning.

Another example of a character in John that I have been working on is Satan or the Devil and how he is characterized throughout the Gospel of John. At first glance, it might appear that Satan plays a rather integral and rather significant role in the Gospel of John. And he is referred to in several times in several crucial places.

But once again, what we need to do is ask the question, how is the character of Satan or the Devil? And there's one other term that is used to refer to the same individual. The ruler of this world is used three times. Actually, he's called the Devil three times, and then Satan one time, and then the ruler of the world three more times.

So seven times in all, Satan is referred to. So actually, Satan does not at least overtly get mentioned very frequently in the Gospels, which might suggest he's not a main character or a primary character. But second, it's important to look at how he is referred to.

Number one is to notice, again, in a text like John chapter 6 and verse 70. Then this is the first time we see the mention of the name Devil or Satan. And Jesus replies, Peter has just told Jesus, Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of life.

And then Jesus says, have I not chosen you, the twelve, yet one of you is a Devil. Or it could even be translated, one of you is the Devil. And Jesus is referring to Judas.

Again, what is interesting is to note here that Judas is identified as a Devil. The Devil does not play a role here in doing anything or performing any actions. But he simply the term Devil is used to identify Judas.

And furthermore, the Devil is couched in a speech of Jesus. So again, the Devil here plays no part in the narrative except to identify Judas. The next place that he is mentioned is in chapter eight, and verse 44, where Jesus is in conflict with the Pharisees.

And the question gets raised over, and this is in a context of different responses, appropriate and inappropriate to Jesus. And Jesus now kind of the high point of his discussion in his debate with the Pharisees is found in verse 44, over the question of who is the true father of the Pharisees. Jesus is working with a common idea or metaphor that one's origin determines one's character.

So the Pharisees are claiming we are children of Abraham. And notice what Jesus says in verse 44, you belong to your father, the Devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, and not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him.

When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar, and the father of lies. Again, what I want you to note is that the Devil is referred to here several times as

the Devil as the father, but also with pronouns such as he or him. But again, I want you to notice that in the narrative, Satan doesn't do anything.

He's simply characterized as the father of the Pharisees. And even when it does describe him, once again, it simply identifies him as a murderer. When he does do something, he speaks lies.

But again, all of this is embedded within a speech of Jesus. So Satan's not doing anything, Jesus is simply referring to him and talking about him in a way to demonstrate the true source of his conflict with the religious leaders, with the Pharisees. So here, Satan primarily plays the role of inciting or instigating the activity of the Pharisees, or the religious leaders, who, if you read the context more clearly, the problem with the Pharisees is they refuse to listen to Jesus who speaks truth, and they want to kill him.

Because of those two activities, failing to believe the truth and wanting to kill Jesus, Jesus can say, you are of your father the Devil, who is a liar, and who is a murderer. He's a murderer, and he speaks lies. So Satan here simply functions not as a main character in the narrative, but to demonstrate the true source behind the main participants, the main actors, who are the religious leaders, or the Pharisees.

Satan is referred to in, or the Devil, a reference to the Devil in a couple of other places. In chapter 13, verse 2, the evening meal was being served, and the Devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus, and Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power. Here, the Devil is again mentioned not as a primary actor in the narrative.

And notice again, he's presented in relationship to Judas. He's already influenced Judas. But again, the main character in this story is Jesus.

Grammatically, this statement about saying the Devil already prompting Judas is simply a backdrop to what Jesus does in verse 4, where he's going to take a towel and wash the disciples' feet. So once again, Satan plays a rather minor role, an insignificant role in the narrative. Again, not that he's unimportant, or not that Satan is not important himself, theologically, but we're asking, what role does he play in the narrative? How does Satan function? How is he referred to? How does the author present him as acting in the story and in the narrative? The last place that Satan is referred to is in verse 27, towards the end of the same story, after Jesus washing the disciples' feet, and after predicting his betrayal.

Verse 26 says, Jesus then answered, they're asking, who's going to betray you? And Jesus says, it is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish. Then dipping the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas Iscariot, son of Simon. As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him.

This is the first place where Satan is the subject of a verb, of action, of doing. And the first and the only place he actually does anything in the whole Gospel of John. Everywhere else until this point, Satan has simply been referred to in speech by or beginning of chapter 13, he functions in relationship to Judas as a backdrop for Jesus performing the action of washing his disciples' feet.

Now, for the first time, Satan actually does something. Now, Satan is referred to three more times throughout the Gospels with another designation or phrase, and that is the ruler of this world. Satan three times is called the ruler, or some translations have the prince of this world.

So, for example, chapter 12, verse 31, Jesus said, this voice was for your benefit, not mine. Now is the time for judgment on this world. Now the prince of this world will be driven out.

The prince of this world, or ruler of this world, referring to Satan. He's referred twice more in chapter 14, and also then in chapter 16, and verse 11, and in regard to judgment, because the ruler of this world, or the prince of this world, Satan, now stands condemned. Now, what is intriguing, again, is that in all of these instances where Satan is called the ruler of this world, or he's labeled the ruler of this world, first of all, note again that all of these references of Satan as the ruler of this world occur in the speech of Jesus.

They're embedded in the speech of Jesus. So again, in the narrative, the ruler of the world does not do anything. He's simply referred to in the speech of Jesus.

And furthermore, in all the references to the ruler of the world, Satan is portrayed as being judged. He is the one, he is rendered powerless, and in all of these references, he now stands condemned, or he now stands judged. He's a defeated foe.

What is interesting is two other things. Number one is, notice the irony of how Satan is portrayed. The very thing that Satan incites other people to do, like Judas and the religious leaders, to betray and kill Jesus, that ironically turns out to be Satan's judgment and his downfall.

So in these cases, when Jesus refers to Satan already being judged, or now the prince of the ruler of this world is condemned or judged, that's because that's in the context of a reference to Jesus' death, his glorification. So ironically, the very act of Satan, remember we saw the reference to the devil and Satan is in connection with Satan entering and influenced Judas, and being the father, the true source, the origin of,

the father of the murderous, deceitful activities of the religious leaders. The very thing that Satan does turns out, ironically, to be his downfall and his judgment.

But another interesting thing, notice that the names, there's a pattern to the way Satan is presented and named. When Satan is called the devil, or the one time he's called Satan, it's always with reference, with relationship to other human actors, namely Judas and the religious leaders. So when Satan is discussed in relationship to other human actors, such as Judas and the religious leaders, he's depicted as Satan and the devil.

And that seems to be a very apt correlation. The devil, meaning the accuser, or Satan, meaning the adversary, the enemy, this is the role of Satan. And probably both the word devil and Satan stem from, at least according to a text like Revelation 12 and verses 9, stem from the creation narrative in Genesis chapter 3, where Satan deceived and killed and brought death to Adam and Eve.

So now Satan, or the devil, is an appropriate name to use for Satan's activity of inciting and influencing Judas and the religious leaders to believe a lie and to kill Jesus. It's interesting, though, that, however, when you find Satan in relationship to God or Jesus, he's referred to the ruler of the world, or the prince of the world. Probably because for a couple reasons, perhaps.

Number one, the issue is one of who is it really in control? Who is truly the king of the world? There's a cosmic battle or conflict, and now Satan, as the ruler of this world, bows to another ruler and is defeated and rendered powerless by another ruler, which is Jesus. So the issue is one of power and one of kingship, and so Satan is described as the ruler of this world. Also, perhaps, because several times Jesus is described as not of this world, then Satan is, in contrast, seen as the ruler of this world.

So even the way the names are used, there's a pattern where when Satan is seen as interacting with or in relationship to human beings, Judas and the religious leaders, he's portrayed as Satan or the devil, who deceives them and incites them to believe a lie and to murder. When he's depicted in relationship to God or Jesus, other supernatural beings, he's depicted as the ruler of this world, that demonstrates his defeat, his loss of power, and his bowing to another ruler, and is losing the cosmic war and the cosmic battle. So by looking at the way that a character is portrayed and presented in the Gospels, even grammatically, what role they play, are they the subject of verbs, they're actually doing actions, or are they merely the objects of verbs, are they being merely identified, are they merely modifying something else, are they embedded in the speech of someone else, or are they actually playing a role in the world.

All of that indicates the role that an actor or participant plays. So based on that, in John, I would conclude that Satan is, although important, a minor character as far as the role he plays in narrative. It doesn't mean he's minor theologically, or that he's minor in his influence or importance.

It means in the narrative, as far as how he is portrayed as acting, and as a participant, he plays more of a supporting role in inciting other human actors to be deceived and to kill Jesus, rather than playing a major role in acting throughout the narrative itself. So narrative criticism can frequently tell us about how characters function, how the plot of a story might be put together, the point of view of the author, and all of that helping us to come to grips again with the text itself. How is the text working? What might be the author's strategy in communicating? One, just as kind of an aside again, not to get too carried away with it, but one interesting thing that is interesting in and of itself in comparison with how narrative works, but which also might also be significant in helping helping persons understand how stories and narratives work, is

often to watch movies and notice how the plots develop in movies, how characters are portrayed, how there's often rising tension and it gets resolved, and then how the story is brought to conclusion, how things like characterization or type scenes or repetition or important crucial speech can all function to reveal the significance of of a narrative or story.

One movie that I think of, and hopefully some of you can identify with this, this is an older movie, but when my wife and I were first dating, the very first movie we went to was a movie called Back to the Future, number one. I think there's three of them now, Back to the Future 2 and 3, but it's a story of a teenager portrayed by Michael J. Fox, some of you are familiar with him, who actually travels in a time machine back in time, and actually certain things happen that threaten to undo and alter the course of time, and so he goes back in time, and fortunately he's able to rectify things, but when he comes back to the present, after being in the past, when he finally comes back to the present, he does see that things are altered, but in a rather surprising and pleasing way to him. But one of the interesting things in that movie is to understand what might be the point of view of the narrative, what might be the main message and the main perspective and point of view of the story.

There's two interesting things that happen in that movie. Number one is a phrase that gets repeated in a couple important places two or three times, one of them right at the end, and that is, you can do anything if you just use your head. But along with that is when you watch the movie carefully, notice how many times this phrase is buttressed by scenes where the physical head features, particularly at the end of the story, where the character played by Michael J. Fox, who is back in the past, he needs to get back to the present, and he's in a car, a DeLorean, that is able to do that, and the problem is the DeLorean stalls.

He needs to reach a speed at a certain time so he can get transported back into the present, but the car stalls, and what does he do? He bangs his head on the steering wheel, and the car starts. That type of scene where the physical head is involved features several times throughout that movie. So putting that all together, the main perspective or message that the movie is trying to communicate is you can do anything if you just use your head.

So narrative, again, narrative works like that, by examining the plot, examining how the characters are developed, how they interact, by looking at crucial speeches and things that are repeated, asking the kinds of questions you would of any narrative or story can be beneficial in helping us to come to grips with narrative literature. Now let me end by just raising several issues related to strengths and weaknesses of especially narrative type approaches to the Old and New Testament. First of all, as far as the strengths of narrative approaches, narrative approaches are valuable in that they pay close attention to the details of the text.

In the past, especially for evangelical scholars that hold to the Bible as the inspired word of God, as I do, narratives were seen as mainly containers from which to extract the main theological truth. So narrative was simply seen with value in that you would mine it just to pull out what is the theological propositional truth found in the narrative. But narrative approaches help us to see that narrative is not just a container of the truth, but communicates the truth itself.

And so narrative approaches help us to pay attention to the details of the text by looking at the plot, such as, again, the exposition and crisis, rising tension, the resolution, etc., how the characters are developed, etc., etc. Helps us to focus on the details of the text. And we said any approach that helps us to focus on the detail, the text itself, is certainly to be welcome, especially for those who hold to the Bible as nothing less than the word of God.

Anything that brings us in contact with the details of the text. A second value of narrative approaches is that they focus on the text as a whole, the final form of the text, rather than preoccupation with the forms behind the text or reconstructing the sources, whether hypothetical or not. Instead, once again, consistent with an understanding of inspiration, narrative approaches help us focus on the text as a whole, the final form of the text, rather than dissecting it and asking about the origins and sources.

Not that that is not, cannot be valuable, but ultimately we finally have to deal with the final form of the text, the text as a whole, as it stands. And narrative criticism can help us do that. In fact, narrative criticism sometimes can help us to see unity in the text where previously there was thought to be disunity or conflicts or contradictions or maybe a kind of a scissors and paste origin of putting the text together.

Sometimes narrative approaches and literary approaches can help us see how the text is actually a coherent unity. Number three is narrative approaches and narrative criticism reminds us again, related to number two, but reminds us that the text itself is the locus of meaning, not the activity behind it. And once again, this should be welcomed by evangelicals for whom the scriptures are inspired texts, the word of God.

So as much as, as much as asking questions about the origin of the text and the background of production, ultimately we need to focus on the text itself. Number four is narrative approaches remind us that texts come before theology. New Testament and old Testament narrative texts are not only pretexts for our own theological schemes and to support in our own theological constructs, but instead theology is dependent on the analysis of texts.

And because of that, also a narrative and literary approaches remind us then that our theology must account for all the data and all the details in the text, not just ones we select. In the past, I often heard, when I was taught hermeneutics and interpretation, very biblical interpretation, very early on, I often heard something like this is you shouldn't base your theology on stories and narrative. The problem is most, much of the Bible is in the form of story and narrative.

The problem is not basing my theology on narrative and story. The problem is not knowing how narratives and story works to communicate theology. Number five, a fifth strength is that narrative approaches remind us of and focus on the aesthetics and the effects of the text.

It is sometimes valid to read the text, and I'm convinced sometimes the stories, the biblical stories were told in a way not just to communicate theologically, but because of the effect. So again, narratives are not just containers for propositional theological truth. Again, sometimes the stories are there for the effect and for the intrigue and for the literary impact that they have.

And then number six, I think one of the strengths of a narrative approach is it opens us up to new insights in the text that we may not have seen before or we may have overlooked. To mention just a couple of weaknesses of narrative approaches that have overlap with what we've already said with literary approaches more generally. Number one, sometimes narrative approaches are in danger of ignoring the historical dimensions of the text.

One cannot emphasize the plot and character, etc., and lose the historical background or the historical referentiality of the text. Again, especially for evangelicals that are convinced and for Christians that are convinced that the Bible is nothing less than a record of God's acts in history on behalf of his people, a

revelation of God's, God revealing himself in history, so that the history of the text is lost. Instead, we need to be reminded that the texts have an author that produced it.

They are written in the language that was used by people to understand it. They were produced in a specific historical context. So sometimes we need to be aware of the danger of losing the history, ignoring the historical dimensions of the text.

Number two, the danger of losing or ignoring the theological dimensions of the text. That is, we have to remember that not only is this the inspired Word of God, but we have an entire collection of Old New Testament documents that the church claims as its scripture, as the very Word of God that testifies to God's redemptive activity for his people, ultimately in the person of Jesus Christ. And then finally, third, some of the methods and categories may be in danger of being imported into the text.

And we always have to raise the question, can we use modern categories of fiction and modern literature to analyze and understand ancient texts? This is not to say we can't. It's merely to make sure that the text itself determines how we analyze it and must control the kinds of questions we ask, the kind of categories that we bring to it. So given those caveats, those weaknesses, the text-centered approaches of literary criticism and narrative criticism can be valuable tools in helping us see the text in new ways and looking at the text as a whole, looking at the details of the text and understanding how it works and how God reveals himself through story and narrative to his people today.

The next session, we will look at two more literary approaches, or I should say, better yet, text-centered approaches, approaches that give precedent to the text itself. And that would be structuralism, which we'll treat very briefly, and I'll explain why. And then rhetorical criticism or rhetorical approaches that are not completely divorced of historical questions and author questions, but again, focus on the text as a whole and

look at the inner workings of the text and look at the text itself, or the text primarily, as the locus of meaning or the place of interpretive activity.