

# Dr. David Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 13, Narrative Criticism Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide, and 5) FAQs

## 1. Abstract of Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 13, Narrative Criticism, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

This lecture excerpt from Dr. Dave Mathewson's hermeneutics course explores literary and narrative criticism as applied to biblical texts. **The lecture first introduces literary criticism's text-centered approach**, contrasting it with historical methods. **It then focuses on narrative criticism**, examining how plot, character development, and narrative voice contribute to meaning in Genesis 22 and various Gospel passages. **Specific examples include Freytag's dramatic analysis of Romans 1-8 and analyses of characters like Barabbas and Satan in the Gospel of John.** Finally, the lecture discusses the strengths and weaknesses of narrative criticism, emphasizing its value in close textual reading while cautioning against neglecting historical and theological context.

**2. 15 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 13 – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link there (Introduction & Languages → Introductory Series → Hermeneutics).**



**Mathewson\_Herme  
n\_Session13.mp3**

### 3. Briefing Document

Okay, here is a detailed briefing document summarizing the key themes and ideas from the provided lecture transcript on narrative criticism:

#### Briefing Document: Narrative Criticism of Biblical Texts

**Overview:** This lecture by Dr. Dave Mathewson provides an introduction to literary criticism, focusing on its application to biblical texts, and then delves specifically into narrative criticism. It explores how these approaches analyze texts by emphasizing the text itself, its structure, and its inner workings rather than focusing primarily on historical context or authorial intent. The lecture highlights the value of these methods while also cautioning against potential pitfalls.

#### I. Literary Criticism as a Text-Centered Approach

- **Core Principle:** Literary criticism prioritizes meaning as found within the text itself, often bracketing historical questions related to authorship, sources, and context. The focus shifts to the "world in the text."
- *"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..."*
- **Examples:** The lecture initially references the analysis of parables as fictional literature, looking at their structure and characters. It further introduces an intriguing approach by Gustav Freytag, who argues that Romans 1-8 can be analyzed as a five-part drama, with chapter 5 as the climax.
- *"Freytag has suggested that we can break Romans chapters 1 through 8 down into a five-part drama...he suggests, for example, that chapter 1 verses 16 and 17...is sort of the inciting action, the initial action of the drama...chapter 5 is the climactic turning point of the narrative."*
- **Cautions:Imposing Modern Structures:** There's a risk of forcing modern literary categories or structures onto ancient texts. Any imposed structure must be grounded in the text itself.
- *"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."*

- **Ignoring Historical and Theological Dimensions:** Literary criticism shouldn't disregard historical or theological aspects, particularly in religious texts.
- *"the danger of ignoring the historical and theological dimensions of the text...Historical and theological questions cannot be ignored."*
- **Value:** Despite these cautions, literary criticism is valuable for its close attention to the text and for offering new perspectives.
- *"Literary criticism allows us to encounter the text in new ways. It allows us to be in touch with the text itself..."*

## II. Introduction to Narrative Criticism

- **Focus:** Narrative criticism analyzes texts from the standpoint of literary studies of narrative, asking questions about plot, characters, and point of view. It treats biblical texts as stories.
- *"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..."*
- **Key Elements:**
  - Narrator and Narratee:** Distinguishes the voice within the text (narrator) from the historical author. Narratee refers to the intended audience of the narrative within the text.
  - Point of View:** The perspective or attitude the author takes toward the events.
  - Plot:** A typical narrative plot follows a structure:
    - Introduction/Setting (exposition)
    - Conflict/Crisis
    - Rising Tension
    - Climax
    - Resolution
    - Conclusion
- *"Most narrative, in terms of narrative criticism, narrative is usually seen as moving along a plot that begins with the introduction or the setting...The next element...would be the conflict or the crisis in the text...then causes a rising*

*tension...that then reaches a climax, which then experiences a resolution. The resolution then brings about a solution...And then the conclusion..."*

### III. Application of Narrative Criticism

- **Old Testament Example: Genesis 22 (The Sacrifice of Isaac)****Exposition/Setting:** God's intention to test Abraham is revealed at the outset.
- **Crisis:** God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac (seen as a threat to God's promise).
- **Rising Tension:** Abraham's obedience and Isaac's question about the sacrifice.
- **Resolution:** God provides a ram, stopping Abraham's sacrifice.
- **Conclusion:** God reaffirms his blessing to Abraham.
- *"the exposition or the setting is found in chapter one, where the narrator clearly indicates God's intention to test Abraham...The crisis arises in verse two...The crisis is a threat to the very promise of God...And then comes the resolution in verses 11 through 14...And then in verses 15 through 19 is the conclusion."*
- **Character Analysis:** Characters can be classified as:
  - Round (well-developed, dynamic)
  - Flat (underdeveloped, static)
  - Comic (positive ending)
  - Tragic (negative ending)
  - Main or Peripheral
  - Examples:
    - Elisha (round)
    - Saul (tragic)
    - Goliath (foil, highlighting the conflict between David and Saul).
  - *"Some narrative critics have expressed interest in classifying characters as to whether they are round characters that get developed fully...or whether they're flat characters that don't get much development at all...or whether the character is a tragic one...or again, whether the character is a main character or a peripheral one...Goliath seems to be a foil that both David and Saul confront."*

- **New Testament Examples:Gospels:** Mark as a consistent story, Matthew with rising hostility towards Jesus, John with Jesus as protagonist and responses of others.
- *"The gospel of Matthew could be seen as developing along the lines of growing hostility...The gospel of John, in the gospel of John, Jesus functions, obviously, as the primary protagonist..."*
- **Character Function (Gospel of John):Barabbas:** A minor character who serves as a foil to highlight the innocence of Jesus and show the crowd's participation in illegitimate actions. He is not an actor in the narrative, but an object of verbs, and used to highlight the crowd's preference for a criminal over an innocent man.
- *"Barabbas does not appear to be a significant person in the narrative...he probably stands as a foil...they would prefer the death of an innocent person over someone who is an insurrectionist or rebel."*
- **Satan/Devil:** Satan's role is more of a supporting character in inciting others and not a main actor. His characterization shifts depending on his relationship to other characters, particularly the relationship to God or Jesus and human beings (Judas and the religious leaders). When with human beings, he is referred to as "the devil" or "Satan" implying deception and opposition, but when with Jesus or God, he is referred to as "the ruler of this world" highlighting his defeat and judgment.
- *"Satan is, although important, a minor character as far as the role he plays in narrative...he plays more of a supporting role in inciting other human actors to be deceived and to kill Jesus...when Satan is discussed in relationship to other human actors...he's depicted as Satan and the devil...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."*
- **Movie Analogy: Back to the Future:**
- The movie serves as an example of narrative elements in action (plot, character development, repetition, message) showing the message, "You can do anything if you just use your head" through repeated phrases and scenes emphasizing the head.
- *"the main perspective or message that the movie is trying to communicate is you can do anything if you just use your head."*

#### IV. Strengths of Narrative Criticism

- **Attention to Detail:** Encourages close reading and focus on textual details.

- *"narrative approaches are valuable in that they pay close attention to the details of the text."*
- **Focus on Final Form:** Emphasizes the text as a whole, rather than its hypothetical origins.
- *"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."*
- **Meaning in the Text:** Highlights the text as the locus of meaning, not external factors.
- *"narrative approaches...reminds us that the text itself is the locus of meaning, not the activity behind it."*
- **Texts Before Theology:** Reminds us that theological understanding comes from the text and not the other way around.
- *"narrative approaches remind us that texts come before theology...theology is dependent on the analysis of texts."*
- **Aesthetic and Effect:** Recognizes that narratives may have an artistic purpose beyond theological propositions.
- *"narrative approaches remind us of and focus on the aesthetics and the effects of the text."*
- **New Insights:** Provides opportunities for discovering new interpretations of the text.

## V. Weaknesses of Narrative Criticism

- **Ignoring Historical Dimensions:** Risk of losing the historical context and referentiality.
- *"sometimes narrative approaches are in danger of ignoring the historical dimensions of the text."*
- **Ignoring Theological Dimensions:** The text needs to be understood in terms of theological purpose.

- **Importing Modern Categories:** Risk of imposing external frameworks that may not be appropriate for ancient texts.
- *"some of the methods and categories may be in danger of being imported into the text."*

**Conclusion:**

Narrative criticism is a valuable tool for understanding biblical texts when used responsibly. It allows us to appreciate the literary features of scripture while also paying close attention to the details of the text. It emphasizes the text itself but needs to be balanced with historical and theological concerns. The lecture concludes by suggesting that subsequent sessions will cover more text-centered approaches such as structuralism and rhetorical criticism.

## 4. Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 13, Narrative Criticism

### Narrative Criticism: A Study Guide

#### Quiz

1. What is the primary focus of literary criticism, and how does it differ from historical approaches to biblical text? Literary criticism is a text-centered approach that emphasizes the internal workings of a text, focusing on structure and literary elements rather than historical context or authorship. Unlike historical criticism, it prioritizes the world within the text itself as a source of meaning.
2. According to Gustav Freytag's analysis, how can Romans 1-8 be viewed as a five-part drama? Freytag identifies Romans 1:16-17 as the inciting action, 1:18-4:25 as the increasing tension, chapter 5 as the climax, chapters 6-7 as falling action, and chapter 8 as the resolution, thus interpreting Paul's letter through the structure of a drama.
3. What are the two primary issues to be aware of when applying literary analysis to biblical text, according to the lecture? When applying literary analysis to biblical text, one must avoid imposing modern structures or categories not grounded in the text itself, and also avoid ignoring historical and theological dimensions of the text.
4. What are some of the key elements explored by narrative criticism? Narrative criticism explores elements such as plot, characters (including how they are developed and interact), story time versus narrative time, and the point of view of the narrative.
5. In narrative criticism, how is the voice of the text typically understood? In narrative criticism, the voice of the text is understood as the narrator within the text itself, not necessarily the historical author. The focus is on the perspective and choices made within the narrative.
6. What are the basic elements of plot structure often identified in narrative analysis? The basic elements of plot structure typically include the introduction or setting, the crisis, rising tension, the climax, the resolution, and the conclusion.
7. How does the narrative of Genesis 22 (the Akedah) exemplify the elements of plot? In Genesis 22, the setting is God testing Abraham (v.1), the crisis is the

command to sacrifice Isaac (v.2), rising tension is Abraham's obedience (v.3-10), the resolution is God stopping the sacrifice and providing a ram (v.11-14), and the conclusion is the reaffirmation of God's promise to Abraham (v.15-19).

8. How are characters often classified in narrative criticism? Characters are often classified as round (developed) or flat (undeveloped), comic (positive ending) or tragic (negative ending), and as main characters or peripheral characters, often analyzing their function and interactions.
9. How is the character of Barabbas portrayed in the Gospel of John, according to the lecture? Barabbas is a minor character, primarily presented as the object of verbs. He is a foil, emphasizing Jesus' innocence, and his role as an insurrectionist also reflects the crowd's involvement in illegitimate action.
10. What role does Satan play in the Gospel of John, and how does his characterization change depending on the context? In the Gospel of John, Satan is not a main actor. When presented in relationship to human actions (Judas and the Pharisees), he is called the Devil/Satan, the deceiver; and in relation to God or Jesus, he's portrayed as "the ruler of the world", a defeated foe.

### **Answer Key**

1. Literary criticism is a text-centered approach that emphasizes the internal workings of a text, focusing on structure and literary elements rather than historical context or authorship. Unlike historical criticism, it prioritizes the world within the text itself as a source of meaning.
2. Freytag identifies Romans 1:16-17 as the inciting action, 1:18-4:25 as the increasing tension, chapter 5 as the climax, chapters 6-7 as falling action, and chapter 8 as the resolution, thus interpreting Paul's letter through the structure of a drama.
3. When applying literary analysis to biblical text, one must avoid imposing modern structures or categories not grounded in the text itself, and also avoid ignoring historical and theological dimensions of the text.
4. Narrative criticism explores elements such as plot, characters (including how they are developed and interact), story time versus narrative time, and the point of view of the narrative.

5. In narrative criticism, the voice of the text is understood as the narrator within the text itself, not necessarily the historical author. The focus is on the perspective and choices made within the narrative.
6. The basic elements of plot structure typically include the introduction or setting, the crisis, rising tension, the climax, the resolution, and the conclusion.
7. In Genesis 22, the setting is God testing Abraham (v.1), the crisis is the command to sacrifice Isaac (v.2), rising tension is Abraham's obedience (v.3-10), the resolution is God stopping the sacrifice and providing a ram (v.11-14), and the conclusion is the reaffirmation of God's promise to Abraham (v.15-19).
8. Characters are often classified as round (developed) or flat (undeveloped), comic (positive ending) or tragic (negative ending), and as main characters or peripheral characters, often analyzing their function and interactions.
9. Barabbas is a minor character, primarily presented as the object of verbs. He is a foil, emphasizing Jesus' innocence, and his role as an insurrectionist also reflects the crowd's involvement in illegitimate action.
10. In the Gospel of John, Satan is not a main actor. When presented in relationship to human actions (Judas and the Pharisees), he is called the Devil/Satan, the deceiver; and in relation to God or Jesus, he's portrayed as "the ruler of the world", a defeated foe.

## Essay Questions

1. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of narrative criticism as it applies to biblical texts. How can these strengths be maximized, and the weaknesses minimized?
2. How does analyzing the plot structure of a biblical narrative, such as the story of the Akedah in Genesis 22, affect your understanding of the text's meaning?
3. Compare and contrast how a major character (e.g., Jesus in John) and a minor character (e.g., Barabbas or Satan in John) are portrayed and function within a Gospel narrative, and explain the narrative significance of their roles.
4. Explain how paying attention to literary elements, such as repetition and characterization, can provide new insights into the meaning of biblical narratives, using examples from the provided lecture.
5. How can modern interpretations of movies and other forms of narratives contribute to a better understanding of biblical narratives?

## Glossary of Key Terms

- **Literary Criticism:** A text-centered approach that focuses on the internal workings of a text, its structure, and literary elements to determine meaning.
- **Narrative Criticism:** A subset of literary criticism that focuses on the analysis of narrative texts, examining elements such as plot, characters, point of view, and narrator.
- **Plot:** The sequence of events in a narrative, typically including exposition, crisis, rising tension, climax, resolution, and conclusion.
- **Characterization:** The way in which an author develops and portrays characters, classifying them as round or flat, comic or tragic, and main or peripheral.
- **Narrator:** The voice that tells the story within the text, distinct from the historical author.
- **Narratee:** The person or audience to whom the narrative is addressed.
- **Foil:** A character who contrasts with another character to highlight their qualities.
- **Inciting Action:** The event that starts the main conflict of a story or plot.

- **Rising Tension:** The development of the conflict after the inciting action, leading up to the climax.
- **Climax:** The turning point or most intense moment in a narrative.
- **Falling Action:** The events that follow the climax, leading to the resolution.
- **Resolution:** The point at which the conflict is resolved or the tension is released.
- **Epistle:** A letter, often one of the letters included in the New Testament.
- **Referentiality:** The connection between a text and the historical reality to which it may refer.
- **Hermeneutics:** The theory and method of interpreting texts, especially religious texts.
- **Sanctification:** The process of becoming or being made holy.
- **Justification:** The act by which God declares a sinner to be righteous.
- **Structuralism:** A method of analysis that looks for underlying structures within language or texts.
- **Rhetorical Criticism:** A text-centered approach that focuses on the persuasive elements and strategies used by an author to influence an audience.
- **Aesthetics:** The branch of philosophy dealing with the nature of beauty and art.

## 5. FAQs on Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 13, Narrative Criticism, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

### FAQ on Literary and Narrative Criticism of Biblical Texts

- **What is literary criticism, and how does it approach biblical texts?** Literary criticism is a text-centered approach that focuses on the internal workings, structure, and literary elements of a text to determine its meaning. It often brackets historical questions like authorship, sources, forms, and historical context, choosing instead to focus on the world *within* the text itself. This involves analyzing aspects like plot, character, structure, and style. For example, instead of seeing Romans 1-8 solely as a letter, literary critics might analyze it as a five-part drama.
- **How does narrative criticism specifically analyze biblical texts?** Narrative criticism examines biblical stories through the lens of literary narrative principles. It investigates aspects such as the plot structure (exposition, crisis, rising tension, climax, resolution, conclusion), the development and types of characters (e.g., round, flat, comic, tragic), the point of view of the narrator, and the relationship between the narrator and the narratee (the intended audience). These elements help to reveal the narrative's meaning and strategy of communication.
- **What is the significance of "plot" in narrative criticism?** In narrative criticism, plot is understood as the sequence of events that drive the story. It typically begins with an introduction or setting that presents the characters and the initial circumstances, followed by a crisis or conflict that introduces rising tension. This tension builds to a climax, which is then followed by a resolution and finally a conclusion that ties up the loose ends of the story. Analyzing the plot structure can uncover the story's central message and how it achieves its intended effect.
- **What are the different ways that characters are analyzed in narrative criticism?** Narrative critics analyze characters based on their development and function within the narrative. Characters may be classified as "round," meaning they are fully developed with complex traits, or "flat," meaning they are simplistic and static. They may also be categorized as "comic" (ending happily) or "tragic" (ending negatively). Furthermore, critics examine how characters interact with each other, and whether they serve as foils to highlight another character's traits or a major theme.

- **How can analyzing grammatical function of a character in the text reveal its significance in the Gospel of John?** By analyzing how a character is grammatically presented (e.g., as the subject or object of verbs), one can gain insight into its role in the narrative. A character who is frequently the subject of action verbs is likely a major player, whereas a character primarily presented as the object of verbs or only identified by a state of being (e.g., "Barabbas was a robber") may have a more limited, foil-like role in the story.
- **What are some strengths of applying literary and narrative criticism to biblical texts?** These approaches bring significant value by emphasizing close attention to the text, its details, and its final form as a whole. They prioritize the text itself as the locus of meaning rather than hypothetical reconstructions behind the text. This approach highlights that the texts are not just containers for theological truth, but that they communicate this truth in and through their literary form, while also opening up new insights and focusing on the aesthetics and effect of the text.
- **What are some potential weaknesses or dangers of using literary and narrative criticism?** Some dangers of literary and narrative criticism include potentially ignoring or downplaying the historical and theological dimensions of the text. Additionally, there is a risk of imposing modern literary structures and categories onto ancient texts, which may not be appropriate or accurately reflect their original intended meaning. It is crucial to ensure that literary and narrative analysis remains grounded in the text itself, its historical context and broader theological claims.
- **Can you summarize how the character of Satan is portrayed in the Gospel of John using the principles of narrative criticism?** In the Gospel of John, Satan is not portrayed as a major character despite several mentions. He is often referenced in Jesus' speeches, usually linked to other human actors like Judas or the religious leaders, where Satan is identified as "the devil" (accuser) or "the adversary". In contrast, when related to God, he is called "ruler of this world," highlighting his judgment and defeat. Thus Satan serves more as a foil demonstrating the origin of evil actions and ultimate cosmic defeat rather than an independent actor within the core narrative, showing he primarily incites other figures to action.