The scroll of Ruth re-told through librettos and music: biblical interpretation in a new key

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CHAPTER ONE  LITERARY ANALYSIS: CONCEPTS AND TERMINOLOGY

We can enjoy the beauty of a flower without knowing all the components of the soil from which it grew, but our enjoyment will be enriched by a scientific understanding of its development and evolutionary history. Similarly, we analyze and try to appreciate the literary techniques employed by biblical writers not merely in order to appreciate their art: the techniques are the medium through which the writers transmitted their meanings. Modern readers can only begin to grasp the meanings by paying close attention to their methods (Alter, World, 64). In this chapter, therefore, I will briefly discuss concepts and terms of literary analysis which will subsequently be applied to Ruth in chapter 2. These are:

- Division into Narrative Units
- Character Depiction and Development
- Plot Development
- Genre
- Intertextuality and Allusion
- Gap Filling
- Reader Response
- Female Authorship
- The Narrator and Focalization

DIVISION INTO NARRATIVE UNITS

Aristotle, in his Poetics, specified three requirements for a drama, called the three unities. These are unity of action, of place, and of time. They require a play to have a single action represented as occurring in a single place and within the course of a day (Online Encyclopaedia Britannica). These have continued to be operative models in which all subsequent drama has been rooted. The unities of place and time are a consequence of unity of action. By “action,” Aristotle meant not random acts but action initiated with a view to an end, and carried out in its pursuit. Thus, action can include a whole complex of subordinate actions (Lucas, 96).

The analysis of time in narrative is complex, involving a link both with objective time outside itself (narration time) and with the literary time inside it (narrated time). Examining the relationship between these two can be fruitful (Bar-Efrat, 143).

In general, time can be viewed from three perspectives: order, duration and frequency, to answer the questions “When?” “How long?” and “How often?” There is a discrepancy between the amount of time events are supposed to have taken, and the amount of text devoted to their narration (Rimmon-Kenan 2002, 46). Biblical narration and narrated time are the same, and are based mostly on conversation, or “scenes.” Therefore, the speed of time within scenes is about the same as narration time, requiring the convention of a suspension of disbelief for the reader.

The variation between narrated and narration time, between scenic representation and summary account, highlights the focal points of the narrative and the relative importance of its different subjects (Bar-Efrat, 151). The more important the subject matter in a narrative, the longer its time of narration will generally be. The longest scenes are the highlights of the story, and length is usually created by repetition or the use of dialogue. The amount of text devoted to particular scenes as opposed to others may be seen as an indication of the writer's priorities. But it is not always so simple. Ordinarily, more important events or conversations are decelerated, while less important ones are accelerated. But sometimes the effect of shock or irony can be produced by reversing this expectation (Rimmon-Kenan 2002, 56) (ch. 2, p. 21).
In some biblical narratives, the movement of the characters from one place to another is a focal point of the plot, though the significance of each place may not be as fully comprehensible to the modern reader as it was to the reader in ancient times (Bar-Fratt, 186). Nonetheless, the choice of a place is never random: when the author of any narrative wants to give the story a feeling of historical reality, he chooses familiar places. The place aspect is always functional, and understanding its function in the story can lead to a better grasp of the story’s meaning (Amit, 124). For example, the city of Bethlehem plays an important part in the Scroll because of its strong biblical associations with food (ch. 2, p. 38). My own division of the Scroll into acts and scenes can be seen along with other scholars’ divisions in chapter 2 (p. 21).

CHARACTER DEPICTION AND DEVELOPMENT

A major attraction of narrative is the possibility of identifying with the characters. Characters are often attacked or defended as if they were people that the commentators like or dislike. Literature is written by, for, and about people. It is important to state this banal truism to remind ourselves that the people with whom literature is concerned are not real people, not flesh and blood, but fabricated paper people. Characters are not human beings; they only resemble them; lacking a real psyche or ideology, they only have characteristics that make possible psychological and ideological descriptions of them (Bal, 1997, 115, 118).

The question of God as a character in the Bible has been raised by diverse commentators. There has been much debate over whether God is a developing character, a type, or a flat character (Amit, 73). The depiction of God determines how the characters in a given biblical narrative are portrayed. When God is depicted as distant, humans are painted as more complex (Amit, 83). This is generally the case in the later biblical books. God can be seen variously as intervening or observing, among or above humans, acting or merely supervising. The more God is viewed as commanding, the more the characters in the story are flat or one-dimensional. From a literary perspective, the relationship between God and humans can be seen as part of the world of the text, the vision of reality embodied in the biblical narrative (Culley, 38). In the Scroll, God is virtually absent from the action and God’s name appears primarily when referred to by the characters. References to God by the characters are often increased in librettos (Table E, p. 221).

On the level of the story, characters differ from one another, and in that sense they are individual. On the basis of the characteristics allotted to them, each functions in a different way with respect to the reader. Characters also may change, and these changes may alter the configuration of that character. The reader gets to know the characters (though not equally well), will find some more appealing than others, and will identify more easily with some than with others (Bal, 1997, 115).

To state these ideas in more technical language, in mimetic theory, characters are equated with people, while in semiotic theory they “dissolve into textuality” (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002, 33). It is possible to reconcile these two theories by seeing the characters both as part of the design of the text, and as abstractions or constructs in the story. Though these constructs are not human beings in the literal sense, they are in part modelled on the reader’s conception of people, and in this way they are “person-like” (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002, 33).

Four different principles together construct the image of a character: repetition, accumulation, relationships to other characters, and transformations (Bal, 1997, 126). In the case of the Scroll, the last two are most relevant and I will focus on these. We obtain information about a character in three ways:

1. Characteristics can be mentioned explicitly by the character itself;
2. We deduce characteristics through the character's speech and actions (implicit and open to different interpretations);
3. The narrator makes explicit statements about a character (Bal 1997, 129-30). Information about the inner feelings of characters in literature may be supplied by the narrator, by other characters, or by the subjects themselves.

Four general criteria can be used to determine who is the leading character in a narrative: the focus of interest; the comparative number of verses devoted to each character; the structure of the story; and the theme, when it can be determined (Amit, 88, citing Sternberg, 1970). Each character observes the world from his or her own perspective. Their divergence in interest, interpretation, attitude-propels the action forward, and their convergence leads to plot resolution (Sternberg, 172).

Biblical narrative utilizes more indirect than direct depiction of characters. This indicates the biblical writers' greater stress on action, since, as Bal puts it, "Direct characterization posits the priority of being, while indirect characterization favors the priority of action" (Bal 1987, 107). The reader must try to understand characters mostly through their speech and action. Underlying this attempt is a search for consistency. Because a narrative is circumscribed within a very limited time frame, single actions must succeed in defining personal traits, contrary to real life, when actions over a lengthy period of time would define such traits. The characters in a story, like people in real life, may exhibit conflicting traits, and may seem different to different people. The mind of the reader can conjure personality traits of biblical characters with infinite nuances.

The kind of speech assigned to a character--its syntax, tone, imagery, lengthiness--help delineate the character and his or her relation to others. Narration has a subsidiary role to characters' direct speech. Biblical writers seem to be less interested in actions per se than in the response of characters to actions. Direct speech is the primary means of revealing the varied relations of characters to actions in which they are involved (Berlin 1994, 83). Speech is used to depict character, as well as for exchanging information, forwarding, or explaining the plot. The image of a character is built up through its relationships with other characters. Biblical scenes are largely dialogues (especially true for the Scroll), indicating an assumption that whatever is significant about a character can be manifested almost entirely in that character's speech. In some cases characters are distinguished by their manner of speaking. In the Scroll, for example, Naomi's and Boaz's speech patterns differ from those of other characters, signalling their different social standing (ch. 2, p. 22).

In a dialogue, one person is trying to arouse a certain emotion or attitude in the other person; and by this means, the reader can learn about both the characters. Much of what is spoken in biblical narrative is directive speech, meant to impel someone to a particular action. This kind of speech can reveal the speaker's intentions and hopes, and through this, some of his or her characteristics. When the person being addressed responds (which is not always the case), the reader can also learn about that character through his or her reactions (Bar-Efrat, 64, 70). When a person does not respond, the silence can carry as much force as words, much like silent measures in music (Fewell and Gunn 1990, 17; ch. 6, p. 114). A failure or refusal to answer can have great significance, though it is in the reader's mind to define that significance. One of the

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Polak gives an interesting example of how just a short sentence can reveal character: the questionable mother standing before Solomon who tells him to go ahead and cut the baby in two (1 Kings 3, 26). The rhythm of the sentence highlights her cruelty and contrasts with the speech of the other mother (Polak 273).
most notable silences in the Scroll is Naomi’s lack of response to Ruth’s heartfelt plea (ch. 2. p.48).

Indirect characterization, using words and deeds to describe characters, treats personality as something mobile. In many biblical narratives, a person’s character is constantly shifting and changing, since it is revealed in transient, real-life situations. This view of human nature is represented in the Bible by a minimum of adjectives, which illustrate aspects of personality, and a higher percentage of verbs, which relate to speech and deed (Bar-Efrat. 90).

Character description in the Bible does not generally enable the reader to visualize the character, since physical description of characters is sparse and always seems to have a purpose. The writer’s interest was to situate characters in terms of their place in society and to describe their outstanding traits; in other words, to relate to the reader what kind of people they are (Berlin 1994. 36). The biblical writers created characters of depth and complexity using sparse means and many gaps.

One device in character depiction is the plot itself. Plot and character serve one another. The characters’ personalities can influence the course of events, while the opposite is also true (Bar-Efrat. 77). Rimmon-Kenan points out that character and action need not be subordinate to one another, but can also be seen as interdependent. Character can determine incident, and incident can illustrate character, to paraphrase Henry James (Rimmon-Kenan 2002. 35-6). Changes in a character may be instigated by events, but conversely, character changes may also influence events (Bal 1997. 129).

Another action used to define character is one person’s judgment of an action performed by another, which reveals aspects of both the judge and the one judged (Bar-Efrat. 81). This is clearly illustrated in Boaz’s speech to Ruth (2.11-12), which reveals his judgment of Ruth and also his own generous nature.

Analysis of speech patterns, dialogues, and speech-propelled action will all play an important part in my analysis of the Scroll. Speech patterns can highlight class differences (ch.2. p. 22), while dialogues predominate throughout the Scroll and most of the action is initiated by speech acts. For example, paired speech acts within a plot might be an instruction given and obeyed; a question asked and answered; a request made and accepted (Culley. 50). These can all be found in the Scroll as devices to advance the action.

**PLOT DEVELOPMENT**

Plot is variously defined. Culley sees it as a series of action sequences, each of which is a movement within a story from the arousal of an expectation to its fulfillment. Stories advance on the basis of what Culley calls “paired action.” (Culley. 50. 53), which is not identical with plot, since there can be more than one such action sequence within a plot. Sasson, using Propp’s analysis of fairy tales and applying it to folktales in general and *Ruth* in particular, points out that it is the various characters’ functions that propel the story forward. Each character has a function, and characters’ roles are determined by their influence on the development of the plot (Sasson, 201).

On a generic level, most narrative deals with a problem and its resolution (or lack thereof) (Nidaich 1993. 21). One key element of plot development is the progress in knowledge that occurs through time. At least one character in any biblical narrative experiences discovery. Sternberg calls this passage from ignorance to knowledge “one of the great archetypes of literature...another Hebraic innovation” (Sternberg, 176). A more specific variation of this is the
morphology of the underdog, where the problem is a hero or heroine's lack of status and the resolution is improved status.

The classic pattern in biblical narrative, in addition to the passage from ignorance to enlightenment, is:

from a calm point of departure through the stage of involvement to the climax of conflict and tension, and from there rapidly to the finishing point and tranquility (Bar-Efrat, 121).

The two main principles in combining events to form a story are temporal succession and causality (Rimmon-Kenan 2002, 16). Speech-propelled action is the most relevant element of plot for reading the Scroll. There certainly is a problem and a resolution, and a progression from ignorance to knowledge. But the plot is continually propelled forward by dialogues between the characters.

GENRE

Four basic elements can be found in any genre: a typical structure, vocabulary, setting, and function. The function is connected to the intention. Any individual work will accomplish its goal and intention in accord with the typical function of its genre. It should always be kept in mind that genre studies are descriptive, not normative. If a work is unique, its distinctiveness must be recognized (ch. 2, pp. 37; Coats, 11). But in order to recognize a deviation from the norm, that norm must first be clearly defined.

There are many definitions and theories relating to genre. I am considering four of these ideas here.

According to Northrop Frye, the importance of establishing a genre is

...not so much to classify as to clarify traditions and affinities, thereby bringing out a large number of literary relationships that would not be noticed as long as there were no context established for them.

(Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, quoted by Sasson, 215).

According to LaCoque,

Genre can be determined by the date of a work's composition, and the purpose of the book could be determined by the reader based on when that reader believes it was written (LaCoeque, 84).

Barton defines genre as

...a conventional pattern, recognizable by certain formal criteria...which is used in a particular society in social contexts which are governed by certain formal conventions (Barton, 32).

Coats clearly spells out the goals of genre studies:

To identify a class of literature that facilitates a functional definition of any given work belonging to that class, how it functioned in the context of its original place in society, what needs or goals that literature fulfilled and how (Coats, 8-9).
The first two of these fall into the trap of circular argument: by defining a story one way—say, as a folktale—elements of that genre will be found in the story in order to uphold that definition. Basing a genre on dating a text can also lead to circular arguments. Since no definitive date will ever be available for the authorship of a biblical text, dating is not a reliable means of determining genre or agenda.

If we determine social contexts and formal conventions through the literature, based on Barton's idea, we could then turn around and do the reverse. Nonetheless, Barton makes the valid point that no text is exempt from the requirement to conform to some genre or type, with all the expectations that genre brings with it (Barton, 92). Coats makes the same point, noting that in any kind of interpretation, some classification will always occur, and it should be controlled. False assumptions about genre can lead to great misunderstandings (Coats, 9), which I pointed out in my discussion of the dangers of circularity.

Recognizing certain folkloric patterns and motifs in a given story teaches much about the worldview behind that story, even as it is found in different cultural settings. The dominant aspect of folkloric is narration (Niditch 1993, 17), which dominates in many biblical narratives, certainly the Scroll. Folklore traits, such as the sharing of patterns and motifs found in different cultures, can be found throughout the Bible. Well-known examples are the motifs of birth of a hero (such as Samson, in Judg. 13:24), riddle-solving (Judg. 14:12), and tricksters (Jacob disguised as Esau, in Gen. 27:5-23). Folklore is relevant to the Bible partly because it may elucidate the process of moving from oral to written literature. At the same time, it is not possible to prove that any biblical work was orally composed: a written version could precede a later, oral version (Niditch 1993, 4, 7, 11).

Niditch believes that the Hebrew Bible evolved in an oral culture. In ancient Israel, the oral and written were part of a continuum. Oral style informs the written Bible. Yet we cannot reconstruct with certainty the social contexts that are essential to understanding folk genres as oral performance (Niditch 1993, 6). Literacy in a traditional culture such as ancient Israel would have been informed by the oral aesthetic, but oral and literate societies exist in a continuity, and there is no simple evolution from oral to written (Niditch 1993, 8). The modern reader needs to understand the oral aesthetic and the world that provided its context in order to fully understand biblical literature (Niditch 1996, 24, 45; ch. 2, p. 36).

The writing of ancient texts probably involved a mix of established tradition and new creation, like the process in oral tradition. Biblical writers could be considered custodians of the traditions they shared with their audience, though they were creative in the service of those traditions (Culley, 22). These concepts are important in analyzing the Scroll because it is often called an example of originally oral literature, and may also display elements of folklore. Labeling the Scroll as any one genre has proved problematic (ch. 2, p. 37).

INTERTEXTUALITY AND ALLUSION

No text exists in a vacuum; all texts are embedded in a web of related texts. For this reason, reading the Bible intertextually—i.e., hearing the echoes of one biblical story within another—is inevitable. Recognizing that what seemed to be a single voice is actually in dialogue with other voices leads to a reinterpretation of each single voice (Fowler 1992, 12, 17). Intertextuality is based on transformations, as textual elements or patterns that are repeated are also transformed when they are incorporated into a new text (van Wolde 1997, 429). The repetitions can be of textual units or structures, of themes or genres, of depicted actions, of single
words, or of narratological representations. In all cases, the perception of these repetitions is dependent on the reader’s background. Not every reader will grasp every intertextual allusion.

Julia Kristeva, who coined the term intertextuality in 1969, was considering “intertexts,” the books of specific cultures of which a text only forms a part. She differed in this definition from Bakhtin, who 40 years earlier had introduced the idea of “dialogicity” or dialogues between texts. His perspective was from one text to other texts, rather than only intertexts (van Wolde 1997, 427).

Intertextual allusions, echoes of one narrative within another, are text-linking devices that are common in the Hebrew Bible. They function to draw disparate elements into a certain unity. Such allusion is important in the Hebrew Bible because it replaces explicit commentary by the narrator, inviting the reader to glean connections through the awareness or intuition of correspondences between stories. It can have various purposes: to evoke a moment in an earlier story for the narrative purpose in the present story; to underline a theme; define a motive or character; or provide a particular orientation toward an event, in the service of an ideological argument. Allusion is a natural means of reinforcing ideological continuity (Alter, World, 51, 103, 128-9).

There are major intertextual relationships in the Scroll that I will not be treating at any length because they have been done extensively elsewhere: for example, the link between the story of Ruth and that of Tamar found in Genesis 38 (analyzed in depth by van Wolde 1997, 432-451). The various types of intertextuality to be treated in chapter 2 are: themes, including type-scenes; character and semantic allusions; and allusions to other Ancient Near East literature.

The device of intertextual allusion is found extensively in librettos based on the Scroll, but new allusions are created. For example, most 19th-century librettos quote various Psalms, which would have resonated for the listener of that day in a particular way (Preface to ch. 6, p. 101).

GAP FILLING

Gaps are central in all narrative fiction because no matter how detailed the presentation is, more questions can always be asked. There may be either temporary or permanent gaps; in other words, some ambiguities are resolved before the end of the story, while others are never resolved. The reader cannot know which are permanent and which temporary, and this uncertainty is the basis of the dynamics of reading (Rimmon-Kenan 2002, 128). There can be gaps in action and time, cause and motive, character and appearance (including age and class), and personal relationships.

There is a distinction between relevant and irrelevant gaps, the latter of which Sternberg calls “blanks,” between what was omitted for the sake of interest and what was omitted for lack of interest. The pitfall, he notes, is that “one reader’s gap may prove another’s blank” (Sternberg, 236). The weakness of this argument is its sheer subjectivity. By leaving gaps, a text is

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1 Berlin offers a fine analogy, comparing biblical stories to frames from which films are made. Though each one exists separately, and they are combined in a particular order to make the full narrative, an individual frame has no life of its own outside the film as a whole (Berlin 1983, 125). Though some frames may stand alone better than others, the perspective from which the reader understands each story is different when the entire Bible is seen as the context. This is presumably the perspective from which the ancient writers expected the Bible to be read, although this can never be known with certainty.
indicating that it does not prescribe its own meaning, but leaves that to the readers to discover, uncover, or create for themselves. The text can be seen as a kind of exercise for the reader, who has to interpret it as coherent, in spite of its gaps (Barton, 210).

The end result of a gap is ambiguity, a product of the discontinuity. But some see a different end result. A many-gapped scene structure may suggest to some readers that someone has taken care of the intervening stages and set the events in motion, and that this tactic underlines the central role the author has given to God (Amit, 61). Here Amit is straying into the arena of determining the author’s intent, but biblical authors left no records of their motives. Amit hypothesizes that they wanted to be believed by their readers. She imagines a “contract” existing between the biblical author and the public, which states that the world depicted in the stories is real and not fictional. If we accept this, then modern readers who doubt the biblical story are violating this contract (Amit, 94), or else they are creating a new contract with the text. I don’t believe that Amit can know the mind of the biblical writer better than can any other modern reader; yet she is correct to assume (as do most commentators) that God had an important and active role in the biblical writers’ worldview.

A story gains its dynamism through omissions. Gaps enhance interest and curiosity, prolong the reading process, and force the reader’s active participation in making sense of the text (Rimmon-Kenan 2002, 127-9). Gaps and ambiguities are best viewed as integral to the narrative art, rather than as problems to be solved. The motivations and emotional life of the characters are not unimportant, but they are not described. This forces the reader to contribute his or her own meaning to the story, based on how he fills in the gaps in characterization (Linafelt, Introduction, xiii, 17).

The gaps that are of greatest interest to the midrashists (ch. 3, p. 54ff.) are not the same as those that interested the librettists (Preface to ch. 6, p. 102), revealing different agendas. Music as midrash is better suited to filling gaps in character and personal relations. Age is revealed at once in the choice of voice type (ch. 5, p. 99), while relationships are depicted in musical ensembles (Table D, p. 219). The rabbinc midrashists were more concerned with understanding cause and motive (ch. 3, p. 56). Motives assigned to the characters by librettists are generally those of affection or romantic interest, which lend themselves well to musical depiction.

**READER RESPONSE**

Reading is a cultural enterprise. No scholarship is void of interpretive acts, of historical and ideological biases. Meaning is a property of the act of reading. Reading is the actualization of possibilities within each reader’s mind (Bal 1989, 13-15). Traditional interpreters have insisted there are correct answers, even if we cannot find them. Historical critics believed that biblical texts ultimately had a single correct meaning, and that their method was the correct way to find it. Gunn and Fewell find “the arrogance of this position...breathtaking” (Gunn and Fewell 1993, 8).

Reader-response critics acknowledge that there is no one correct reading—a position to which I subscribe. How any text is interpreted is always based to some degree on who is doing the interpreting. A biblical interpreter such as Carol Meyers brings an understanding of archaeology and other ancient Semitic cultures to a biblical text, which might bring her interpretation closer to the original meaning. A literary critic such as Robert Alter brings a deeper understanding of methodology to biblical narratives. Yet there can never be one correct reading, because no one can read the mind of the writer or fully understand the intended audience. Every reading differs from the text itself (Bal 1987, 132).
Meaning is not somewhere in the text waiting to be discovered. Meaning is, in the end, the reader’s creation, guided by the writer; and readers, like texts, come in an infinite variety. The meaning of a text lies somewhere in the interaction between the text and the reader (Gunn and Fewell, Preface, xi; and 193). All authors and editors serve ideological agendas, whether expressed or not, which shape their stories (Gunn and Fewell, 6, 91).

For example, gender and sexual orientation also affect reader response, a factor that has not been noted until more recent times (Exum, 174). Some women scholars reading the Scroll have posited a female authorship (see below). Though this idea was first posited by a male scholar, S.D. Goitein, it was subsequently supported and developed by women scholars, who have found it a more convincing reading (ch. 2, p. 50).

Bal seems to believe that we can grasp what effect the author wanted the narrative to have on the reader. She suggests we should ask not only who is speaking the words or where they come from, but what is being suggested for us to believe or envision, to hate, love, admire, or argue against (Bal 1997, 224). She believes there is a motive hidden in the text and that we should try to understand why we respond a certain way, rather than just responding. Though this does take cultural bias into account, nonetheless individual reader response precludes the possibility of any universal or “correct” way to interpret any narrative. In fact Bal says this herself: “the point of literary analysis is that there is no truth, and that this contention can be reasonably argued” (Bal 1987).

Reader response theory is particularly appropriate to reading the Scroll. Three women, of Jewish, Cherokee, and African heritage, would be likely to read Ruth’s profession of devotion to Naomi in three entirely different ways (ch. 2, p. 50). The librettists who interpreted the story were also readers, and they incorporated their responses to the Scroll in their re-writing of it.

FEMALE AUTHORSHIP

When the language of female experience can be heard in a narrative, it is plausible evidence for a female text, because that language is rare. The unusual phrase “mother’s house” found in Ruth 1.8, Genesis 24.28, and Song of Songs 3.4 and 8.2, is a possible example of Israelite women’s language. These stories involve a female perspective on issues normally seen from a male perspective. In each example, a woman’s story is being told; features of wisdom literature are present: women are agents of their own destiny, and as such, they affect others; the setting is domestic; and marriage is part of the plot. Even though these features were recognized by earlier commentators, Meyers notes that there was a tendency to impose contemporary models of family structure on the ancient society depicted in the Bible (Meyers 1993, 109-111).

The distinction between household and workplace that exists in modern society was absent in the society of biblical times. Meyers believes that women probably had much more power in certain spheres than has been recognized. This is not always easy to detect in androcentric texts, but the verses Meyers highlights in Ruth, Genesis and Song of Songs offer glimpses into this reality. For example, she theorizes that Israelite women probably had a role even greater than their husbands in arranging the marriages of their children (Meyers 1993, 112).  

Though these implications are conjectural, there are strong arguments for female authorship of certain texts. Alternately, a male author could employ a female voice, or base a

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1 This is contra Berquist, who states unequivocally that “In ancient Israel, fathers arranged marriages for their children. Naomi’s matchmaking is a male role.” He bases this on Roland de Vaux’s early work on Israel’s social institutions (Berquist, 31).
narrative on a well-known women's (oral) folktale. The connection between folklore and orality was mentioned earlier in this chapter (p.12). Women's literary traditions are presumed to have been largely oral (Brenner 1996. 4). The danger of circular argument rears its head here once again: if the text is read as if the author is a woman, the effect will be different than if it is believed to be written by a man. Awareness of the gender origins of a text could profoundly alter the reading of it (Meyers in Brenner 1993, 90). Once an assumption is made, the arguments can be made from the text or from the assumption itself.

THE NARRATOR AND FOCALIZATION

The act of narration does not represent the world directly, but only modes of representation in the worlds inhabited by the characters. The interaction between reader and text ultimately involves a leap of faith, governed by convention. narration simultaneously assumes a narrator and creates him/her in the process of telling (Rimmon-Kenan 1996. 20-22). The narrator can be defined as the narrative “voice” or “speaker,” while the implied author is, in opposition and by definition, voiceless and silent (Rimmon-Kenan 2002. 87). The identity of the narrator is fictive, and is based on his/her role as storyteller. Yet he/she shares a narrative life, together with the characters, in the reader’s consciousness. We imagine a person behind the voice we are reading (Bach, 14).

Central to the reading of fiction is the act of imagining both a reader and a narrator. Recognizing that the biblical narrator is telling a slanted story, in Bach’s view, has been undervalued. Bach’s solution is to imagine the narrator as a “combination of dual subjectivities, as presenter of Israel’s oral and theological position, and as the one whose version of the stories we are hearing” (Bach, 13-14).

The biblical narrator is inside the narrative, an integral part of the work, one of its most important structural components. The narrator exists alongside the characters, and his/her voice is heard along with theirs. The reader sees and hears only through the narrator’s eyes and ears. The nature of a narrative depends on the point of view from which the events are portrayed, and this comes from the narrator, who is an intermediary between the worlds of the narrative and the reader (Bar-Efrat, 13-15).

The narrator has the power to mould the reader’s attitude to characters and events through his/her comments, and to transmit his/her values to the reader (Bar-Efrat, 24-33). The values transmitted by the narrator are a clue into understanding those of the biblical writer and his/her times, because the implied audience presumably shared the cultural world and attitudes of the narrator (Berlin 1983, 53).

The reader’s perception of the story depends on several factors: the narrative level to which the narrator belongs; the extent of the narrator’s participation in the story; the degree to which his/her role is perceptible; and the narrator’s reliability (Rimmon-Kenan 2002, 94). Information conveyed directly by the narrator is generally more reliable than information mediated through another source, such as a character. The revelation of internal thoughts or feelings can be accepted without question and used in our reconstruction of character. Action is usually reported by the narrator without interpretation, and the burden is on the reader to understand a character’s motivations (Gunn and Fewell, 54).

Meyers quotes a letter to the New York Times that supports the important effect knowing the authorship of a work can have on the reader: the writer points out how if Shalom Aleichem were somehow proved to have composed Mein Kampf, reading that book would suddenly become a very different matter from what it is now.” (in S.G. Hellman, Book Review, January 5, 1992; p. 4). This is a rather extreme example in the service of a very salient point.
There are different degrees of narratorial involvement. The more the author wants to make a story dramatic, the less narration and the more dialogue there will be. The difference between “showing” and “telling” is clearly up to the author (Gunn and Fewell, 51). In biblical narrative, unlike most other literature, the implied author and the narrator assigned the task of communicating the story, practically merge into each other. There is no distance between “maker” and “teller” (Sternberg, 75). The narrator of a biblical story is, in Amit’s words, a “mediating element, chosen and fashioned by the author...an attempt to understand the world of the narrator is, in effect, a glimpse into the author’s world” (Amit, 101-2). The narrator has also been described as “scriptwriter and stage manager rolled into one” (Sternberg 1991, 28), who speaks in voices other than his own but in words of his own devising.

Biblical narrators are complex, and we tend to identify them with “the implied author” (Rosenblatt, 7). The narrator is a fictional construct, virtually another character in the narrative. Readers in the ancient world recognized the distinction between author and narrator. Therefore the modern reader should be careful to keep the author and narrator separate (Gunn and Fewell, 52-3). There is no textual distinction between implied author and public narrator, leading readers to equate the two. They are most easily distinguished in the case of the omniscient narrator.

The theological term “omniscient” is used for the biblical narrator because this narrator is presumed to know, literally, what God knows. The omniscient narrator knows what is in each character’s heart, because the writer invented them. This is true of all literature, but omniscience is a particularly important feature in biblical literature, considered by many readers’ traditions to be God-inspired.

Alter states unequivocally that the ancient Hebrew writers “were obviously motivated by a sense of high theological purpose” (Alter, Art, 155) and that biblical literature is “ultimately oriented toward a horizon beyond the human” (Alter, World, 20). The biblical writer, in his view,

conceives of the world as a place full of things to understand in which the things of ultimate importance defy human understanding...The repeated point of the biblical writers is that we cannot make sense of God in human terms (Alter, World, 22).”

Yet it is fair to assume only that the writer was influenced by his (or her) cultural context and was writing what was expected by the readers of that time. Alter is in a kind of “interpretive alliance” with the author; an alliance running straight from author to narrator to reader. He and Sternberg find a code of conventions within the text, and feel obligated to obey that code, which includes an omniscient and reliable narrator (Bach, 20, 22). But in the end, this is only the writer’s construction, not a reality.

An omniscient narrator serves the purpose of staging and glorifying an omniscient God, because the biblical narrator’s omniscience is equivalent to God’s own, a difficult concept for the modern reader to accept. According to the “inspirational convention” on which the Bible is founded, the narrator’s omniscience is assumed in the “name and service of divinity rather than art” (Alter, Art, 125). Sternberg, who fuses the identity of the fictive narrator with the author

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7 Sternberg states that “To undercut the narrator’s cognitive authority is thus to launch a chain reaction that ends by undercutting God’s own...for God to be exalted, the narrator must be equally exempted from the darkness that he throws about human action and vision” (Sternberg, 184). This assumes that the biblical writer was inspired by God or at least wanted to inspire a belief in the God he wrote about. This is presumably what differentiates the Bible from all other literature, ancient or modern.
Believes that "The Bible's art makes resistance difficult, certainly to the implied audience of believers" (Sternberg, 87). Bal takes issue with Sternberg, arguing that omniscient narration is not an expression of divine omniscience, and that to say as Sternberg does that the reader must accept the "divine power" of the narrator severely circumscribes the reader's freedom of response (Bal 1991, 61). Bal is correct: only the reader who assumes biblical narrative is divinely inspired will view the omniscient narrator as a reflection of God. The secular reader, instead, assumes it is another facet of the writer's literary technique. As Bach points out, the redactors have spliced the biblical narrator's voice with the author's and with God's voices, so we must separate the narrator's agenda from his simple story-telling (Bach, 15).

Even though the narrator is omniscient, he still chooses what to tell and when to tell it. Sternberg sees this choice as a means of manipulating the reader into the desired attitude; thus it is a means as well as an end. The disparity between the narrator's assumed omniscience and the knowledge he chooses to impart to the reader, is motivated by communicative purposes (Sternberg, 87).

The omniscient narrator is never really absent from the narrative, for the characters' speech is embedded in the narrator's, who might also define the nature of the speech. The omniscience of the narrator can serve varied purposes. Through the narrator's total disclosure, the reader can fathom secret thoughts and plans of the characters. In this way, the reader is elevated into a similar state of omniscience (Bar-Elfrat, 41-2).

The reader can only "see" the story through the narrator's lens. The biblical narrator is like a camera's eye, selecting what he will show and from what perspective; he can survey a scene from a distance or zoom in for a detail. He can choose which character to focus on (Berlin 1983, 44). Precisely because the narrator's is a view from above, the characters can never have the same knowledge or perspective. They must find their way without the sort of "aerial map" the narrator is presumed to have.

The intermediary between the reader and narrator—the "photographer" role—is the "focalizer," who influences how the reader will perceive the characters in the story. Three agents function in three layers, sometimes overlapping: the narrator, focalizer, and actor (Bal 1997, 22). The focalizer, standing midway between the narrator and the character (Bal 1991, 87) is an aspect of the story told by the narrator, the represented "coloring" of the story by a specific agent of perception. Focalization is interpretation, because what the reader sees has already been interpreted.

There is an external focalizer distinct in function, not identity, from the narrator (Bal 1999, 19, 63). There is a distinction between the one who sees and the one who speaks, or "the vision through which the elements are presented and on the other hand, the identity of the voice that is verbalizing the vision" (Bal 1985, 101). This external focalizer can sometimes embed an internal one who will then mediate or even produce the "fabula." So the same object or event can be interpreted in different ways by different focalizers, which leads to ambiguity (Bal 1997, 29).

The embodiment of the narrator's privileged but covert "voice" is expressed by the focalizer of the text. The dominant voice of a passage is embodied in the textual figure who speaks, who focalizes the action, and whose viewpoint predominates (Brenner 1996, 7). The term "focalization" stands for the mediation of a particular perspective or point of view verbalized by the narrator though not necessarily his. The terms focalization and point of view encompass a cognitive, emotive, and ideological orientation along with a purely visual one, analogous to photography.
In the Scroll, far more is revealed about plot and character through direct speech than through narration. There are sudden shifts, when the characters are silent and the narrator speaks, a change between “inset and frame,” in Sternberg’s words (Sternberg 1991: 50). These shifts may call attention to a new perspective.

The part of the Narrator is significant in only some librettos (Graph B1, p. 212) and is assumed variously by solo voices of different ranges or, more often, by the chorus.

**CONCLUSION**

Any artistic work adheres to certain conventions, is based on previous compositions, and is grounded in a particular cultural and artistic context (Niditch 1993: 12). One of the problems modern readers of the Bible encounter when trying to understand the artistry of biblical narrative, is the loss of “most of the keys to the conventions out of which it was shaped” (Alter, *Art. Art.* 62). These conventions involve words, which have no more inherent meaning than gestures: both are dependent on their cultural system. (Barton, 108-114). Meaning is a function of the structures of a cultural system. And in that respect, literature is analogous to language or society: all are cultural systems. It is possible to gain a better understanding of a cultural system through its texts, just as texts can be better understood and appreciated through better understanding of literary concepts and terms. As “literary archaeologists,” we must use the proper materials and begin our reconstructions with the foundation and frame before we can even begin to visualize how the frame should be filled.