Narrative Criticism and The Hebrew Scriptures: A Review and Assessment

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Book Reviews and Book Notes
"By about 1980," writes David Gunn, "a threshold was crossed" which saw narrative criticism of the Bible take its place alongside the now traditional methods of historical criticism. Although narrative criticism has been on the scene now for more than fifteen years, it still sometimes encounters strident opposition from some biblical critics. For others, narrative criticism remains largely unfamiliar. Beginning and experienced critics alike often lack a "road map" for acquainting themselves with narrative criticism. The map offered here unfolds in three stages: first, a survey of the major works issued in English since 1980 that treat methodological issues in narrative criticism of the OT; second, identification of a few basic issues in narrative critical theory; and third, assessment of the value of narrative criticism for Restorationists.

Milestones of Narrative Criticism

The story of narrative-critical theory in OT studies begins, for practical purposes, with Robert Alter’s *The Art of Biblical Narrative*. Alter’s guiding principle is careful attention to the four main techniques employed in biblical narration: type-scenes and convention, dialogue, repetition, and characterization. Alter is particularly good at suggesting the significance of divergences from the norms (i.e., most frequently observed features) of these techniques. He skillfully exploits the

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interpretive possibilities of, for example, the omission of elements from a type-scene or the change of key words in repeated dialogue.

One of Alter's more provocative suggestions is his characterization of biblical narrative as historicized prose fiction. He finds special significance in Israel's having cast its sacred traditions in prose, rather than the epic poetry more common in the ancient Near East. According to Alter, this genric shift afforded the ancient Hebrew writers more flexibility and freedom in presenting their sacred traditions than their neighbors enjoyed, and it moved biblical narrative away from the stability and closure of mythology toward the ambiguities of life as humans experience it.

It may seem strange to characterize a move toward "life as it's lived" as a move toward fiction. Indeed, Alter takes pains to note the Bible's "historical impulse." He defines biblical narrative more specifically as fiction claiming a place in history or history fleshed out with fiction. Thus he does not totally discount historiography in biblical writing, nor does he doubt that the events of the narrated world are presented as though they really happened. However, he does posit that whatever historiography might be found in biblical narrative has been enhanced with fictional characters and details.

Some readers may take offense at Alter's identification of biblical narrative with fiction. Such offense should be tempered with two facts. First, historical criticism offends in this regard no less than Alter. It abounds with reconstructions of Israelite history that differ sharply from the biblical portrayals. Second, not all narrative critics follow Alter in describing the Bible as fiction, and it is not necessary to do so in order to benefit from his careful attention to the literary techniques of biblical narrative.

Following Mary Gerhart, "Genric Competence in Biblical Hermeneutics," *Semeia* 44 (1988): 29-44, I use genric as the adjectival form of genre. As Gerhart notes, "The conventional form 'generic' has come to connote aspects such as non-specificity and common variety, aspects unrelated to the process of interpretation" (41 n. 1).
Simon Bar-Efrat’s *Narrative Art in the Bible* is essentially a catalog of the elements of Hebrew narrative technique. Bar-Efrat deals in detail with narration, characterization, plot, time and space, and stylistic devices. His usual approach is to state a principle of narrative technique and then illustrate it with copious examples. For example, when discussing figurative language, he simply defines metonymy, synecdoche, metaphor, simile, irony, and rhetorical questions, and lists several examples of each. The book is an excellent primer on reading Hebrew narrative.

One of Bar-Efrat’s most important contributions is his discussion of the narrator as a character in the story. The narrator, he warns, should not be identified with the writer as a real person. Knowledge of the writer’s life and familiarity with biographical details do not contribute to a better understanding of the narrator in the narrative, since the value systems, attitudes and characteristics of the two are not necessarily identical.

This distinction is quite sound as a matter of narratological theory, but it serves an additional function for Bar-Efrat: It enables his next move, the ascription of omniscience to the biblical narrator. Bar-Efrat offers a series of “proofs” of the narrator’s omniscience, the chief being the narrator’s revelation of the cognitions, emotions, and volitions of the characters, pre-eminently God. Of course, Bar-Efrat’s narrator does not necessarily tell all, but certainly knows all (even that which is not told). The majority of narrative critics to date have concurred in considering the biblical narrator(s) to be omniscient.

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4 Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, Bible and Literature 17 (Sheffield: Almond, 1989). The volume appeared in Hebrew in 1979 but was not translated into English until a decade later. Even though the English translation postdates two other works to be discussed here, both of those works draw on the Hebrew original of Bar-Efrat’s book. Therefore this seems to be the logical (though not chronological) place to discuss it.

5 Bar-Efrat, 14.

6 Omniscience is recognized by narratological theory as one of the most common stances for narrators of fiction, so literary critics may not find the ascription of omniscience to the narrator particularly interesting. However, in the case of the Bible (particularly if one does not follow Alter’s description of the Bible as historicized prose fiction), ascription of omniscience to the narrator has significant ideological dimensions. Some of these ideological dimensions are discussed here in connection with Meir Sternberg’s *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*. 
One such critic is Adele Berlin, whose 1983 *Poetics and the Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* introduced several of the developments in Israeli studies of biblical narrative (including Bar-Efrat’s) to the English-speaking world.\(^7\) Marked significance attaches to the volume’s title. Where Alter spoke of art, Berlin speaks of poetics, “the science of literature, . . . [which] seeks its rules and principles from within literature itself, without recourse to sciences outside of literature, such as psychology, sociology, . . . (and one may add, in the case of biblical studies, history and archeology).”\(^8\) The move to cast biblical interpretation as a scientific enterprise is familiar in the history of biblical studies. To pull biblical interpretation out of the sphere of the natural and social sciences and into the sphere of “the science of literature” is a new twist, though, which attempts to demarcate acceptable lines of inquiry just as sharply as any other such attempt.

On the other hand, the title may suggest that the project is more ambitious than it really is. Berlin treats only selected points of contact between poetics and biblical narrative. She does not propose a comprehensive poetics of biblical narrative. Indeed, she appears to see her own work as a supplement to that of Alter, Bar-Efrat, and Sternberg. Accordingly, Berlin gives extended treatment only to characterization and point of view. The treatment of point of view—which cannot be adequately summarized here—may be the book’s greatest contribution. Its best feature is Berlin’s detailed exploration of the “phraseological” level of point of view in which she studies linguistic features in the biblical text that serve as markers for shifts in viewpoints.

The full significance of construing poetics as a science over against other sciences is seen in Berlin’s polemic against source, form, and redaction criticism. Berlin does not deny that antecedent sources may lie behind the present form of biblical texts. She does, however, argue that the present text is such an artfully conceived work that source-critical methodology probably cannot identify and reconstruct whatever sources do underlie the present text. She further argues that textual features taken

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\(^7\) Adele Berlin, *Poetics and the Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, Bible and Literature 9 (Sheffield: Almond, 1983). The Bible and Literature Series (Almond), the *JSOT* and its supplement series (both from JSOT Press), and *Semeia* and its supplement series (Scholars Press) were the most important early outlets for narrative studies in the Hebrew Scriptures. These have been joined especially by the Indiana Series in Biblical Literature (Indiana University Press) and the Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation series (Westminster/John Knox).

\(^8\) Berlin, 16.
by source and form critics as evidence of discrete units in the present text are better conceived as intentional narrative techniques.

While Berlin’s polemical tone has not been adopted by all narrative critics, her stance does prefigure that of many narrative critics. In principle, narrative criticism does not demand a decision on the theoretical and methodological validity of source-oriented methods. In practice, narrative criticism sets aside the questions raised by such methods and, as Berlin does, treats the biblical text in its present form as a literary unity.

The search for a poetics of biblical narrative was carried forward by Meir Sternberg in *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (1985). In this book Sternberg attempts a “systematic reconstruction” of “the workings and rules of [the Bible’s] ideological art.” The key element in that ideological art is, he suggests, the “foolproof composition” of biblical narrative. The basic idea is that the unique rhetorical strategies of the Bible prevent its being “counterread.” Sternberg claims that any reader who reads the Bible in “good faith” (i.e., without attempting to distort the sense of the text) will get the point. Of the various strategies of foolproof composition which Sternberg adduces in biblical narrative, three are of particular interest: the “rhetoric of glorification,” narratorial stance “between the truth and the whole truth,” and the relationship between ambiguity and ambivalence.

The rhetoric of glorification consists of two components, in both of which two important characters in biblical narrative, the narrator and God, figure. The first component, the “rhetoric of omniscience,” deploys narratorial omniscience in the service of divine omniscience. The strategy works, Sternberg suggests, because narratorial omniscience is attributed to divine inspiration. The narrator knows everything because God, who knows everything, has revealed everything to the narrator. Narratorial and divine omniscience, coordinated under the rubric of inspiration, are so central to Sternberg’s poetics that he refuses to entertain alternative views.

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10 It should be noted that Sternberg is making these claims about the Hebrew Bible, not the whole of Christian Scripture. In fact, he specifically exempts the NT from some of his more lavish praise.
He insists that readerly acceptance of narratorial omniscience in the service of divine omniscience is a *sine qua non* of proper interpretation. The second component of the rhetoric of glorification is the “rhetoric of omnipotence” or, more often, the “omnipotence effect.” Unlike narratorial and divine knowledge, narratorial and divine power are inversely related; that is, the narrator disclaims all control over the story world, ascribing all such control to God. Sternberg’s narrator is “concerned to shape a given world into meaningful discourse rather than to create a world in and through the discourse.” Sternberg’s narrator is constrained by the predetermined content of the narrated world (i.e., what “really happened”). This narrator may decide how much to tell and how to tell it, but not, ultimately, what to tell.

However, the narrator freely exercises the privilege of presentation. According to Sternberg, the biblical narrator maneuvers “between the truth and the whole truth” by careful management of narrative “gaps” or ambiguities. Sternberg’s narrator may withhold much of the whole truth, generating ambiguity. Much of *Poetics* is taken up with Sternberg’s close readings of biblical texts, which demonstrate Sternberg’s dexterity in identifying narrative gaps and posing alternative closures for them. But the revelations of Sternberg’s narrator, however slight, are always situated between the truth and the whole truth, never between truth and falsehood. The postulate of narratorial omniscience protects the narrator from charges of falsehood due to error, and purposeful narratorial falsehood is unthinkable as a matter of ideological principle.

Despite appearances, this dogma of the reliable narrator is not simply a matter of narratological fiat. Rather, Sternberg grounds his insistence on a reliable narrator in the relationship he perceives in biblical narrative between ambiguity and ambivalence. The gaps in biblical narrative most often consist of factual ambiguities in the narrated world. Sometimes the gaps consist of ambivalent judgments; in such cases no evaluation accompanies narrative description. Of course, ambiguity and ambivalence may in principle accompany one another in a given narrative. Readers may not know enough about the facts of the narrated world (ambiguity) to know how to feel about the events taking place there (ambivalence). However, Sternberg maintains that, as a rule in service of foolproof composition, biblical narrative always exhibits an inverse relationship between ambiguity and ambivalence. The greater the ambiguity, the clearer the moral judgment.

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11 Sternberg, 126.
Thus three major components of Sternberg’s poetics converge on foolproof composition. Narratorial omniscience guarantees freedom from inadvertent falsehood. The narrator’s stance between truth and the whole truth and the inverse relationship between ambivalence and ambiguity guarantee freedom from purposeful falsehood. To be sure, Sternberg derives other benefits, both doctrinal (narratorial omniscience highlights divine omniscience) and aesthetic (increasing ambiguity increases readers’ pleasure in reading), of these strategies. Nonetheless, the notion of foolproof composition is the chief beneficiary. With a narrator who never makes mistakes, never misleads or misdirects readers, and rarely (if ever) fails to clearly indicate value judgments, a reader can fail to get the point only through deliberately reading the text in “bad faith.”

Not all critics have agreed with Sternberg, as David Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell’s *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* attests. Its most important difference from the work of Alter, Bar-Efrat, Berlin, and Sternberg lies in its hermeneutical assumptions. Gunn and Fewell give considerably more attention to the *readers* of biblical texts than the other critics discussed here. They recognize that biblical narratives are not only *told* from a point of view, but also *read* from a point of view. Readers’ points of view can decisively color their readings, as Gunn and Fewell show through a comparison of readings of Genesis 4 by Philo, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Claus Westermann, Alan Boesak, and Itumeleng Mosala. In a way, this move complements Rudolf Bultmann’s recognition that presuppositionless exegesis is impossible. Many biblical critics have argued from that recognition that critics ought to identify their presuppositions as clearly as possible and then “correct” for them to ensure objectivity. Gunn and Fewell, however, had rather see readers use their presuppositions in imaginative ways to illumine the meaningfulness of the biblical story for their own situations.

Whereas Alter, Bar-Efrat, Berlin, and especially Sternberg presume or argue for narratorial omniscience and reliability, Gunn and Fewell are convinced of neither. This stems in part from their methodological decision to read the text in its canonical form as a literary unity:

> The claim, however, that the biblical narrator is always “absolutely and straightforwardly reliable” cannot be sustained without significant modification. First, we would need to divide up a story like Genesis–2 Kings into separate units

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or layers, much like the "sources" of the historical critics, and then contain our readings within those boundaries. Otherwise we run into major disjunctions in the text—temporal, spatial, and simply factual regarding the actions of characters—which are highly problematic for the notion of a straightforwardly reliable narrator.\(^{13}\)

Thus Gunn and Fewell find the notion of a straightforwardly reliable, omnipotent narrator to be undermined by biblical narrative itself.

_Narrative in the Hebrew Bible_ is also distinctive for its stress on ethical responsibility in biblical interpretation. Interpreters ought to ask what costs must be paid—and by whom—for their interpretations. Biblical interpretations can enslave, oppress, even kill. But they can also liberate, relieve, and enliven. Gunn and Fewell argue strongly that interpreters must take responsibility for the consequences of their interpretations. In their view interpreters cannot hide behind a claim of disinterested objectivity, saying (e.g.) "Don’t blame me for what the Bible says." Rather, interpreters must be willing to take the blame if what they say the Bible says is blameworthy.

**Basic Issues in the Current Debate**

As the above sketch demonstrates, "narrative criticism" is not all of a piece. The umbrella term masks deep rifts between critics on several basic issues. Three of those issues are identified and explained below.

**Narratorial Reliability**

As previously discussed, narrative critics disagree on whether biblical narrative features a straightforward, omniscient, reliable narrator. Epistemologically, the problem is undecidable: readers cannot know whether narrators know more than they tell, since readers’ only indication of the scope of narrators’ knowledge is what narrators actually tell. However, this seemingly simple move carries with it significant implications. If it is admitted that narrators may know no more than they tell, the possibility is raised that they may in fact know less than they tell. Thus, a move away from narratorial omniscience threatens a loss of narratorial reliability.

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\(^{13}\) Gunn and Fewell, 55.
Narratorial reliability is also presents other problems. Incongruities and contradictions in biblical narrative must be explained. In such cases three obvious possibilities present themselves. First, the narrator may be confused about the facts. Second, the narrator may know the facts but be distorting them purposefully for some reason. Third, the contradictory or incongruous statements may be made by different narrators. Each explanation invokes a less than straightforwardly reliable narrator.

The challenge for champions of narratorial reliability is to articulate another (set of) option(s) that accounts scrupulously for the textual details. Readers who affirm divine inspiration of Scripture will need to take that into account. For Sternberg (e.g.) the narrator is omniscient due to inspiration by an omniscient God. One might reasonably ask, however, whether narratorial omniscience is a necessary corollary of inspiration. Depending on its contours, a doctrine of inspiration might be able to support a view of narratorial reliability without demanding narratorial omniscience. It would, however, still have to account for the textual details which raise the question of narratorial unreliability in the first place.

**Texts, Contexts, Readers**

Traditional biblical scholarship insists that biblical texts must be interpreted “in context.” Narrative critics agree with this statement but pose the question “In what context?” Virtually all biblical critics would agree that biblical texts ought to be interpreted in their immediate literary context. That branch of narrative criticism which is heavily influenced by formalism and the old New Criticism tends to stop here. Underlying the formalist move is the assumption that the meaning of a text is autonomous, or independent of any extratextual realities.¹⁴

Historical-critical scholarship goes on to demand that biblical texts also be interpreted in their compositional context. Usually this involves an attempt to determine what the human author of the text intended to accomplish by writing the text. That intention is inferred from textual details in light of the historical and cultural circumstances prevailing at the time the text is supposed to have been written. Underlying this method is

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¹⁴ “Assumption,” because some such critics simply assume this view as a matter of course (as in “I assume you’ll want dessert after dinner”), whereas others deliberately assume this view as a conscious decision or judgment (“Johnson assumed presidential duties after Kennedy was shot”).
the assumption that texts have single meanings, determined and imbedded in them by their authors.

Narrative critics, not bound by formalist or New Critical assumptions, go further, arguing that there is a variety of contexts within which biblical texts may be interpreted. They do not deny the utility of interpreting biblical texts in their compositional contexts, insofar as those contexts may be determined. They do deny, however, that the meaning of a text can be arrested there. Rather, the context of a text's reception is also legitimized for interpretation. From this point of view, a text can have different meanings in different social locations. Underlying this view is the assumption that readers and texts work together to produce meaning anew in each reading event.15

Thus three broad views of the relationship of meaning, text, and context are at work in contemporary biblical scholarship. The second, monocontextual/compositional view has long enjoyed dominance in biblical studies. However, the third, multicontextual view is gaining credibility and must be carefully considered. The monocontextual/formalist view seems to be losing popularity but nonetheless persists.16

Since one's choice of interpretive strategies is closely tied to one's view of the relationship of meaning, text, context, and readers, it seems prudent for biblical scholars to carefully consider their view of this relationship and to make it as explicit as possible, especially when evaluating the interpretive strategies of other critics whose view of this relationship differs from their own.

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15 I am unaware of any biblical critics who would deny the text any role at all in the production of meaning, although some stress readers more than texts while some stress texts more than readers. For an approach which carefully balances the role of reader and text, see Daniel Patte, "Textual Constraints, Ordinary Readings, and Critical Exegesis: An Androcritical Perspective," *Semeia* 62 (1993) 59–79. It is also important to distinguish between meaning and lexical sense. Even critics who ascribe all the production of meaning to the reader of a text still speak of reading a work, an identifiable, recognizable verbal entity with a relatively stable lexical sense.

The Implications of Interpretation

Ethical questions surrounding the implications of interpretation are particularly acute for critics who take a multicontextual view of interpretation. If a biblical text has several possible meanings, how is the critic to choose among them? For an increasing number of critics, the coupling of ethical responsibility with reading strategy provides an answer. This coupling introduces a question that biblical scholars have not always asked: “What are the implications of my reading of this text? What might be the result if people take my reading of this text seriously?”

This is far more than a simple question of “How will it play in Peoria?” Consider, for example, the story of Lot and his daughters as related in Gen 19:30–38. From one point of view, the actions of Lot’s daughters are heroic. Believing that everyone else on earth has been killed, they in effect sacrifice themselves to preserve the human race. A possible implication of such a reading is that human life is to be preserved even at great cost. From another point of view, the actions of Lot’s daughters are villainous. They get their father drunk and trick him into committing incest without even realizing what he is doing. This reading inverts the actual experience of incest in our world. In our experience, incest is not a result of daughters seducing fathers, but a matter of fathers raping daughters. By promoting this reading of Gen 19:30–38, then, interpreters may (inadvertently, one hopes) promulgate the marked tendency in our society to blame female victims for crimes of sexual aggression.

From a third point of view, the story is etiological with regard to the nations of Moab and Ammon. As such, it is told from an Israelite point of view (one can hardly imagine the Moabites and Ammonites telling this story about their origins) and establishes Israelite ethnic superiority over their “cousin” nations. This reading underwrites racism by implication. It also perpetuates our society’s predilection to blame children for the conditions of their conception (consider the connotations of the word “bastard”).

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17 As André Resner has urged in recent years, this question is particularly crucial for preachers.
18 This is not to suggest that the Bible “got it wrong,” but rather that the biblical story must be handled carefully lest present-day experiences become assimilated to a biblical story which is in fact their inverse.
19 Most of the readings mentioned here derive from a conversation with Danna Nolan Fewell. Cf. Randall C. Bailey, “They’re Nothing But Incestuous Bastards: The Polemical Use of Sex and Sexuality in the Hebrew Canon Narratives,” in Reading from This Place: Social Location and Biblical
Each of these readings of Gen 19:30–38 is based more or less firmly on textual details. Indeed, they all agree on "the facts." Where they diverge is in what they make of the facts — which is ineluctably an act of interpretive will, particularly in the many cases like this where no evaluation, only description, appears in the text. Thus, interpreters must carefully consider the possible implications of that act of will and accept responsibility for the effects of their interpretations.20

Narrative Criticism and Restorationist Biblicism

Biblicism, understood non-pejoratively as "the claim to appeal to the Bible as the only standard for Christian faith and practice,"21 was a hallmark of the early Stone–Campbell movement and remains such for us as present-day heirs of that movement in Churches of Christ. Over the last several years, an increasing number of thought leaders in Churches of Christ have been suggesting that our biblicistic praxis has been incomplete at best and irresponsible at worst.22 Yet recent attempts to "rehabilitate" that interpretive praxis have keyed on the traditional historical-critical modes of interpretation.23 Might narrative criticism have something to offer biblicist interpretive praxis? Yes, in at least three specific ways.

Interpretation (ed. Fernando Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

20 The issue of "the ethics of interpretation" provided the focus for joint sessions of the Reading, Rhetoric, and the Hebrew Bible Section and the Semiotics and Exegesis Section at the 1995 Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature.

21 Russ Dudrey, "Restorationist Hermeneutics among the Churches of Christ: Why Are We at an Impasse?" ResQ 30 (1988) 17 n. 1. It should be noted that biblicism and biblicist are often used "pejoratively to the uncritical, literal interpretation of Scripture" (so Richard N. Soulen, Handbook of Biblical Criticism, 2d ed. (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981) 33. On the other hand, Jewish scholars tend to use biblicist as a shortened form of biblical critic.

22 The most convenient brief survey of such suggestions may be found, perhaps not surprisingly, in a book opposing them, namely, J. D. Thomas, Harmonizing Hermeneutics (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1991).

Respect for the Text

Narrative criticism of all stripes insists on rigorous, careful attention to textual detail. The very heart of the approach is “close reading,” or painstaking analysis of the text as it now stands. This emphasis is something biblicists ought to welcome. Indeed, vis-à-vis historical-critical methods, narrative criticism could be seen as a kind of “back to the Bible” movement—back from the alleged sources, oral traditions, and historical circumstances to a lively and critical engagement with the text in its canonical form.

Religious Use of Scripture

Religious use of the Bible is closer to home with narrative criticism than with traditional historical-critical methods. Jon Levenson has argued persuasively: “The price of recovering the historical context of the sacred books has been the erosion of the largest literary contexts that undergird the traditions that claim to be based upon them.” While the church receives the Bible as a book that has historically informed and continues to inform its life and faith in a variety of contexts, historical criticism treats the Bible as a collection of disparate documents with only a secondary, derivative relationship to life and faith in contexts other than that of the text’s composition. In other words, historical critics must violate their own principles in order to make the Bible—the whole Bible—available for religious uses. As Levenson writes,

The construction of a religion out of all the materials in the Hebrew Bible violates the historian’s commitment to seeing the materials in their historical contexts. The result will correspond to the religion of no historical community, except perhaps some parties very late in the period of the Second Temple.

Obviously this problem is simply compounded when the NT is added to the mix.

To be sure, narrative criticism does not return us to a “flat” view of Scripture, nor does it attempt to harmonize the incongruities in Scripture.

25 Levenson, 37.
Indeed, narrative criticism’s respect for the canonical form of the biblical text will not permit such harmonizations. However, narrative criticism does lend itself more readily to religious uses, for two reasons. First, it stresses the literary context (i.e., the canon) of individual biblical units. For example, narrative criticism treats Genesis through 2 Kings as one story. In this way, narrative criticism’s construal of biblical narrative stands closer to the church’s reception of Scripture than does historical criticism. Second, multicontextual narrative criticism (for which see above) makes the text more readily accessible for religious use in a variety of times and places.

The result is not that readers are now licensed to “take Scripture out of context.” Rather, narrative critics, like religious traditionalists, are simply “committed to another set of contexts, minimally the rest of Scripture, however delimited, and maximally, the entire tradition, including their own religious experience.”26 In other words, narrative criticism affirms that Scripture can meaningfully shape the lives of readers in any given context without first having to be filtered through some other context that is reified as normative.

Equal Opportunity Interpretation

Narrative criticism offers renewed hope for interpretive egalitarianism. The various strands of historical criticism require some rather highly specialized skills such as use of historical, sociological, or anthropological methods to reconstruct history from scant data and evaluation and application of source-critical criteria for dissecting the biblical text. But virtually anyone can follow a story line. One has but to read a familiar story incorrectly to an attentive child to realize this fact.

Of course, those who follow the story line in the original language (be it Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek) will be able to attend to details that a translation-dependent reader might miss.27 Some readers are more imaginative than others. Some readers have better memories and better knowledge of the Bible’s stories, enabling them to make connections

26 Levenson, 4–5.
27 For an interesting account of the effect of the translation one uses on the reading one produces, see Danna Nolan Fewell, “Deconstructive Criticism: Achsah and the (E)razed City of Writing,” Judges and Method (forthcoming).
between stories. Narrative criticism, then, cannot promise a "level playing field"; like all other interpretations of biblical texts, narrative critical readings may be good, bad, or downright awful. These caveats notwithstanding, the primary skill required for good narrative criticism is that one be able to follow a story line very closely. Since the demographic base of Churches of Christ now consists mainly of well-educated persons, narrative criticism holds some promise for realizing a version of "the priesthood of all believers" in our interpretive praxis.

Of course, narrative criticism is not a panacea for interpretive problems and hermeneutical questions. The strategies that apply to reading narrative may not apply to poetic or epistolary literature, although (some of) the hermeneutical assumptions may be transportable among genres. And there remain some unresolved questions, as the preceding discussion has indicated, about the character of biblical narrative and the uses to which it ought to be put. But the potential benefits are vast. In any case, biblicists can hardly disagree with the central methodological principle of narrative criticism: read the text.

Indeed, interest is burgeoning in the making of such connections through a process of reading biblical stories "intertextually." Intertextual readings bring stories from various parts of the Bible into meaningful and mutually illuminating conversation with one another (although typological or prophecy-fulfillment themes tend to be eschewed). For a fine collection of intertextual readings of OT texts, see Reading between Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible, Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation (ed. Danna Nolan Fewell; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992).

Critics who might feel anxiety about this generosity toward "ordinary readings" are referred again to Patte, "Textual Constraints, Ordinary Readings, and Critical Exegesis" (see n. 15 above).