Four Tips for Reading Biblical Narrative

The narratives of the Old Testament are highly concise compared to modern narratives, and they can feel dry to the modern reader. However, we can learn tools to help us appreciate ancient story-telling:

(1) **Every word matters.** Since ancient Hebrew narratives are very concise, authors rarely describe the scenery and or characters' appearance. If the author *does* insert a detail, then it *matters* to the plot. Be on the lookout for how it matters!

(2) **Repetition, or "wasting" words, is therefore the primary tool for emphasis**. Note how Moses emphasizes a certain point through repetition:

> Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw the earth, and behold, it was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth. And God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence through them." (Gen. 6:11-13)

(3) **If the writing is repetitive *and* structured in a parallel way, it becomes poetry**.

Genesis 1:27 God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

(4) **Listen for not just repeated words but for repeated *events, objects* and *images*.** When an item recurs frequently in a story, it is usually being intentionally highlighted as a connecting theme or *motif.* Motifs are key to understanding the plot. They are discovered by reading attentively—preferably the entire book in one sitting—so that we can HEAR similar words and concepts being repeated.

Example: "being fruitful, multiplying offspring, increasing in number"—These interchangeable ideas are repeated in roughly every other chapter of Genesis. Almost every main character is told to multiply, and many events of the plot center on fertility:

- Lots of stories of childbirth, of people trying to conceive (sometimes illegitimately)
- Lots of barren women finally becoming pregnant by God's power
- Several times, a woman of God's choosing is off in a pagan harem, which threatens the mission

This motif across Genesis points us to the author's emphasis and to the plot-line.

Source for Further Reading: Robert Alter. *The Art of Biblical Narrative*. New York: Basic Books, 1981.

Robert Alter is a Professor of Hebrew and Comparative Literature at the University of California at Berkeley. Reviews: "The Art of Biblical Narrative has radically expanded our view of the Bible by recasting it as ... a work of literary art deserving studied criticism. He describes how the Hebrew Bible's many authors used innovative literary styles and devices to tell one of the most revolutionary stories of all time." "It is truly extraordinary that such familiar tales as those of Joseph and David should acquire so much detail and color, as if perfectly restored."