

**TEACHING BIBLICAL NARRATIVE ANALYSIS TO COLLEGE STUDENTS
AND OTHER ADULT LEARNERS**

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ABSTRACT:

Regardless of specializations, many, if not most theology, ministry, or religious studies faculty teach introductory Bible courses. This essay addresses those who find themselves teaching Bible. In the essay, I aim to guide you to the essential components of one important method for studying the Bible, narrative analysis, outline some teaching strategies with which I am experimenting, and motivate you with a story or two about how biblical narratives transform lives. Along the way, I will introduce each of two major concepts of narrative analysis, follow these with descriptions of lesson ideas appropriate to each, and then offer background knowledge to grant some degree of confidence in teaching. I write with the hope that you can build on what I have learned and join in a conversation about improvement of our pedagogy.

Introduction

Few religion professors in American higher education can focus exclusively on courses in their areas of expertise. Many, if not most theology, ministry, or religious studies faculty also teach introductory Bible courses. If you find yourself with the joyous but challenging task of teaching the Bible, I write to you. In this essay, I aim to guide you to the essential components of one important method for studying the Bible, narrative analysis, outline some teaching strategies with which I am experimenting, and motivate you with a story or two about how biblical narratives transform lives. Along the way, I will introduce each of the two major concepts, follow these with descriptions of lesson ideas appropriate to each, and then offer background knowledge to grant some degree of confidence in teaching. I write with the hope that you can build on what I have learned and join in a conversation about improvement of our pedagogy. I also hold another hope, that by carefully considering what I teach and how, I might persuade you to give narrative analysis a go. Because narrative analysis requires disciplined thought, toleration of ambiguity, prayerful study amidst confusion, reconsideration of passages we think we already know, humility, courage, and the development of a new set of skills, I realize that I am asking a lot of my students - and with this essay a lot from you. Turn with me to the 'Big Idea,' the first of the two major concepts of narrative analysis.

Introduction to the "Big Idea" of Narrative Analysis

About twenty years ago, I had cataract surgery. I could hardly see through my left eye. The ophthalmologist determined the lens had to go and an artificial one installed. When the doctor removed the eye patch, a day or two after surgery, I discovered a transformed world. Instead of colors muted and pale, the world was vivid and - well, colorful. Reds were redder.

Greens alive with greenness. For about a week, I knew what Dorothy's journey to Oz was like, from black and white to Technicolor!

About that same time, I took a graduate course in homiletics from Haddon Robinson. Although I had majored in biblical interpretation at seminary, he taught me the most important truth of interpretative or exegetical work. Dr. Robinson insisted that the work of exegesis leads to the 'big idea' of the text. Study 'ends' when I know what the text means, when I can name its 'big idea.' In my life, his lesson began a process that opened my eyes to a Technicolor Bible. Through new lens, I saw better the vivid colors of biblical texts. What 'preacher teacher' Robinson taught eventually led me to an exciting approach for studying biblical narratives, narrative analysis.¹

The good doctor's 'big idea' means that the author, let us say, the Apostle John had an idea that he wanted to communicate. From the various events he had experienced with Jesus, the stories he had heard, the sermons Jesus had preached, the lives he saw transformed by our Lord, John selected what best communicated the idea he wanted his audience to receive. Somehow, a specific story embodied the very idea he wanted to teach. Therefore, he told a story, really a series of stories.

Some think that the story like a container holds the 'big idea.' However, more than a container the narrative "incarnates" the lesson to be learned, much like our Lord Jesus incarnates God's passion to reach a lost and dying world with His love. He was not simply a container, but His dynamic activity and His quiet solitudes, His powerful sermons and His pointed silences, His jaw-dropping miracles and His hard rebukes - all embodied the Kingdom of God. And the narratives told about Him and about His (sometimes faithful and sometimes not) followers of

¹ For a comprehensive treatment of the 'big idea' of narratives, see James Voelz, *What Does this Mean? Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Post-modern World*, St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1995.

both Testaments embody in story form ‘big ideas.’ Narrative analysis helps us to discover and to begin to unpack the various narratives’ ‘big ideas.’

Some believe that narrative analysis is ‘warmed over’ consideration of the context. While it does consider context, analysis asks more than simply, ‘What comes before a text?’ or ‘What after?’ Narrative analysis requires a disciplined examination of all elements of a narrative unit for articulating how each contributes to the unit’s ‘big idea.’ It asks not simply what preceded the text I am studying, but questions like, “How does what precedes the text contribute to the meaning of the passage and to the meaning embodied in the unit’s big idea?” Or “What does this specific character in this storied episode contribute to the big idea?” “Does her presence offer a reliable response to Jesus, or a faithless response?” “Does this recounting of events by Matthew (or Luke) give a vision or perspective on Jesus that has not yet appeared in the gospel account?” “Why mention this character but not another in this episode?” With narrative analysis, not just what is present, but careful consideration of why it is mentioned or part of this narrative sequence comes under the analyst’s scrutiny.

When I teach narrative analysis to college students and other adult learners, I have discovered that my propositional language of ‘stories as embodied ideas’ fails to communicate. After a number of failures, I decided to try a new approach. Lesson One outlines what I do.

Lesson One: The “Big Idea” of a Literary Unit

As I mentioned, narrative analysis assumes that the author begins with an idea, not a story. Rather than the story-as-it-is-received dictating the evangelist’s use, the author searches through the library of storied episodes and selects what best communicates the idea. The evangelist then shapes the story or stories according to his purpose by means of the use of editorial tools like deleting story elements that distract from the idea or amplifying those

elements that best embody the concept, or by including or excluding dialog as it supports or detracts, or by emphasizing character or action through descriptive language. Again, in time past when I told students about these exciting ideas, their eyes began to glaze over. The ideas *are* significant. They are important for learners to understand. However, I have come to the tentative conclusion that the ideas are too important for my words. When a student discovers for herself, learning happens.

Now when I teach the central concept of the dynamic power of ideas in writing narratives, I begin the session by reading aloud an engaging chapter of Lewis Smedes' book on forgiveness, 'The Magic Eyes: A Little Fable.' Sometimes the students applaud. Without a word and on the whiteboard, I outline a simple version of the processes of forgiveness, and then recount a story about unforgiveable injustices from Beverly Flanigan's presentation. I offer the results of Suzanne Freedman's dissertation study of an educational intervention for survivors of incest, a remarkable testimony of the power of forgiveness to restore emotional and relational health. I share a story or two from my own writing. I give them a personal story about my wrestling to forgive. I read aloud Philip Yancey's retelling of Simon Wiesenthal's experience with a dying SS officer and his response to the officer's request for forgiveness. I share how Jesus in Mark's gospel (11:20-26) blends forgiveness with effective prayer and heroic faith. I cap it off with Corrie ten Boom's account of a post-war encounter with a former Nazi prison guard, an outstanding story of forgiveness from the inside – and a testimony of God's capacity to link with our efforts to overcome our resistance to forgive. From this rich supply of ideas and stories, I ask the class to help construct a teaching on forgiveness. We list on the board the various items I have just shared, our library on forgiveness.²

² In my pastoral practice and through extensive research with adult learners, I have found unforgiveness to be a common hindrance to spiritual growth. I selected the topic for two good reasons. First, focused attention on

In small work groups³ of five to seven learners,⁴ I direct them to prepare a teaching on forgiveness from this classroom library and tell them the intended audience is ‘just regular people,’ not spiritual superstars or survivors of some great trauma – just regular people. If they want to define further the intended audience, an idea I encourage, they may do so in their small groups. To give them some guidance, I mention some questions to consider: With what to begin? With what to conclude? At which goal or goals to aim? What to leave out? What to edit? Should any stories be condensed, expanded, or reshaped to fit the need? They work at this task for a half-hour or more. Then each group presents a teaching on forgiveness.

We list their ideas on the whiteboard. As is true with every class of students, every small group will design their own unique teaching. One will use only a few of the stories. Another will use stories to lead to the teaching on the processes of forgiveness and then conclude with example stories. Yet another will devise its own methods for instruction (not relying on presentation), using activities or discussion questions to transition from story to story or from stories to teaching and on to more stories. The variety becomes clear on the board. I ask each group to define the goal of its plan and to clarify any greater specificity about the learners.

I prepare the class for the second phase of our examination of the ‘big idea’ concept, a meta-analysis of the groups’ processes. We look at the plans on the whiteboard. We compare and contrast the specifics of the plan, the goals, the uses of the materials, and the specific target audience of each lesson plan. I question, “What guided your choices?” Students explain, “The

forgiveness meets a genuine spiritual need for many. Second, the content establishes a baseline of knowledge for later discussions on righteousness and justice, mercy and grace, God’s forgiveness in Christ Jesus, and interpersonal relational health in life, families, society, and the church.

³ For rationale and approaches to the use of small groups, see James Davis, *Effective Training Strategies: A Comprehensive Guide to Maximizing Learning in Organizations*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler (especially The group dynamics strategy, pp. 279-320), 1998.

⁴ About the size and management of classroom groups, see Larry Michaelsen, L. Dee Fink, & Robert H. Black, What Every Faculty Developer Needs to Know about Learning Groups. *To Improve the Academy*. Paper 361, 1995. <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/podimproveacad/361>

audience,” “The fit between material and learners,” “The logic of the topic,” “The desired growth or development of the learners,” or “The amount of time we could expect the learners to attend to the topic.” The learners begin to see the relationships between the library, their aims, their specific audience, and the lesson plan they made.

The third movement of this learning event begins when I ask learners to compare the processes they used to develop their teachings with the processes the evangelists used to write the Gospels. The type of teaching the evangelists used, narrative teaching comes with some built-in limitations. We list some. The stories deposited into the church’s library remain finite. Jesus did only so many things.⁵ Only so many (and no more) characters interacted with Jesus. Narrative instruction also carries strengths. It allows many access points into the ‘experience of the story’ for hearers or readers. The various characters allow imaginative entry places into the story world as the reader identifies with (or just as importantly distances oneself from) the various actors in the narrative sequence. By their nature, narratives allow multiple interpretations. Again, the hearer can select the story elements to which she can identify or ignore those to which she cannot. As a teaching strategy, narrative has advantages and disadvantages. The students have identified and engaged with some strengths and weaknesses.

I ask the class more specifically about the creative processes of the evangelists. How does the author respond to the story-as-received? Does the writer simply receive a story and pass it on? Does the evangelist select the story elements most relevant to his idea and emphasize them via elaboration or expansion? Do some elements drop out or fade by reducing their part in the episode? Will the author rearrange the material, even alter the sequence of events in order to

⁵ Please resist the temptation to correct to me with John’s claim of almost unlimited resources (21:25). He defends his use of ‘new’ material, not found in the Synoptic gospels, in effect, by saying, “Not only have I used these, but there are plenty more.” His intent does not oppose the idea of limitation; it does oppose those who would limit ‘Jesus’ stories to those found in the Synoptic Gospels.

recreate his idea in the minds of his readers? They get it. They understand the big idea of a literary unit. You do too, but you need a bit more information than they do.

A Literary Unit: What *You* Need to Know about Literary Conventions in the NT

Several times I have used the odd and undefined term, ‘unit.’ I do so because the literary conventions of the time of the New Testament differ from our own. Please remember, not the evangelists but medieval scholars provided the chapter groupings and verses you find in your Bible. The chapter designations may or may not correspond with the units intended by the authors of New Testament narratives. We want to discover the authors’ intended units. In a discussion of contemporary literary units in English, we might talk about chapters of novels, or paragraphs, or sections, or even selections. With current literary convention, an author indicates the chapter ‘unit’ via a title and space left at the conclusion of the previous chapter. The reader knows that an indented first line begins a paragraph. The original texts of the apostolic writings did not separate words, much less indent paragraphs or provide titles. However, the authors offered the same kind of breathing spaces for their readers and hearers as modern authors. The conventions differ.

Biblical authors used a variety of strategies to signal to their readers the limits of a thought unit. One approach used an *existing literary structure*. For instance, Jesus follows the literary structures of the Hebrew prayer book (Psalms) in Matthew’s account of the Lord’s Prayer (6:9-13) and thus defined the unit. In a similar way, John adapted a well-known narrative structure to open his Gospel. With his paraphrase of Genesis 1:1 and by noting the passing of days (1:29, 35, 43, and 2:1), he used the Genesis days of creation to structure his Gospel’s beginning. The observant reader/hearer knew that John had concluded the opening section when

he reached the end of the episode that records Jesus' miracle at the wedding in Cana of Galilee and "the first of His signs" (2:11).

With another strategy, the author sets the limits of a unit of thought by developing his own *literary formula*. In our storytelling tradition, when we hear the formula, 'Once upon a time,' we know a fairy tale follows. In a similar fashion, these formulas indicate new units. If we continue to trace John's Gospel beyond the beginning, we find that often he provided three different markers to signal a new unit: a religious marker (always a Jewish feast), a temporal marker (usually, 'after these things' or 'then'), and a spatial marker (outlining Jesus' movements) (e.g., 2:12; 5:1; 6:1-4; 7:1-2; 10:22-23). He developed and used a formula. Likewise, Jesus marked a shift to a new subtopic in the Sermon on the Mount with various forms of "you have heard it said," and "when you pray" (or perform other acts of Jewish piety like "give alms" or "fast").

As an occasional unit boundary signal, an author placed *an inclusio*, an unusual (unusual at least in the piece being written) word or phrase at both the beginning and ending of a unit of thought. For instance, with "the kingdom of heaven," Jesus used this strategy to set apart the beatitudes in His Sermon on the Mount. Luke's Gospel offers another strategy. He frequently used *brief summarizing comments* to conclude, introduce or transition between narrative units (e.g., 2:52; 4:14; 5:15-16; 19:47-48), a practice he extended to Acts as well (e.g., 2:42-47; or 6:7). A 'sticky' strategy to identify what goes together would be the *repeated use of a word or phrase* that glues the piece as one, as Paul pastes 1st Corinthians 11:17-34 into a unit with "gather together" (*sunerchomai*, a word not used elsewhere in the epistle). These signals allow the reader a 'breather,' a chance to release information from short term memory, and then prepare for the next episode.

As you teach about these ideas, you may use my examples or if you know Koine Greek or have the time and inclination, you can discover your own. While I demonstrate these linguistic markers of units, I do not require my students to master them. My objective is more modest. I want them to have an awareness of their presence in the New Testament, so they might be better consumers of commentaries. Since numerous contemporary biblical commentaries have extended discussions on units of thought and literary structures, this objective prepares learners to use them. Having introduced the ‘Big Idea’ concept, outlined some lesson ideas, and provided a deeper look into the relationship of a literary unit and its big idea, I now invite you to the second major concept of narrative analysis, descriptive scarcity.

Introduction to Descriptive Scarcity as a Feature of Biblical Narratives

For many years, son David and I – and sometimes daughter Sarah have backpacked into the wilderness of Colorado. Until you sit atop a ‘14er’ in the Rockies, you really do not understand the meaning of the metaphor, ‘being on top of the world.’ After sometimes-grueling climbs and always ‘breath-defying’ hikes, you look down at mountaintops, some capped with snow. Your eyes sweep across the vistas. Mountains thrust themselves through the valley mists. The winds snatch the sweat from your brow to bring cool refreshment, while the visions deeply delight the soul. The memories of the wonders atop the mountains call us back time and again to endure the struggle for the top.

For us to enjoy the panoramic views, we backpack. Between us, we carry a lightweight tent, minimal clothing, just enough water to get us to the next stream or lake, raingear (always needed), lightweight sleeping bags, tough boots, a one-burner stove, fuel, mats to insulate our bodies from the cold ground, some cookery items, pocket knives and packets of freeze-dried food. Sometimes we bring a pack of cards or a book to read in our tent on a rainy day. Not

infrequently, I have eaten with my knife as the only utensil, dried myself with a face cloth (the hikers ‘towel’) after a dip in a mountain lake, and shivered at dawn and roasted at noon the same day. Creature comforts are scarce.

Biblical narratives possess a scarcity much like the scarcity of our equipment. The literary conventions of the time, probably driven by hard realities of the high cost of writing materials, required storytelling characterized by descriptive scarcity. In consideration of the costs of production, the situation demanded a lean narrative style, sparse descriptions of persons and settings, and skeletal depictions of story events. Terse. To the point. Limited descriptors. The evangelists understood that into their gospel accounts, they had to pack the essentials and no more. They knew that regardless of these limitations, the Spirit would lead their readers and hearers into breath-taking experiences of the living Lord Jesus.

Sensitized to the descriptive scarcity of biblical narratives, the reader/interpreter reads in a new way. When description appears, it signals importance – theological, literary, or more likely, both. For instance, in Mark’s recounting of Jesus’ transfiguration (Mark 9), he describes the color of Jesus’ garments. His clothing became “exceedingly white.” Nowhere else in his gospel does Mark use the word, ‘white,’ except in the third theophany, and he uses it to describe the robe of the young man seated at the right in Jesus’ empty tomb (Mark 16). White garments link the second and the third theophanies. Aware of the narrative scarcity, the reader makes a vital theological and literary connection between the two episodes. Mark uses one descriptive word, ‘white,’ to alert the reader to a literary framework for the whole gospel (since the first two theophanies are already linked by the repetition of divine messages). Another example can be found in Luke.

In the first chapter of his gospel, Luke offers two angelic annunciation scenes. Aware of descriptive scarcity, the reader carefully attends to the lengthy descriptions of Zechariah and Elizabeth. He is a priest and she a daughter of Aaron. Rather than simply saying, ‘both were of priestly descent,’ Luke spends his precious narrative space using two different prepositional phrases to describe their priestly heritages. The evangelist wants his readers to attend to these characters *and* to the characteristics they possess; characteristics that he carefully details. Both are “righteous in the sight of God.” They are old. Zechariah is a priest in a society that values religion. They are righteous in a world of piety; old in a culture that respects wisdom gained in experience. The angel’s annunciation of the birth of their son, John the Baptizer, occurs as the priest is performing a holy action to the Lord, specifically offering incense, a symbol of prayer, at the time of day when Israel believed the Lord focuses attention on the temple. Luke’s descriptions of persons, circumstances, and actions of the episode fix in the mind of the reader the significance of the scene.

The advantages of this family, advantages highlighted by Luke’s prolonged and detailed descriptions, stand in sharp contrast to the second annunciation scene. John’s parents are old; Mary is young, a young teenager, and a woman in a ‘man’s world.’ The Holy Place in the Holy Temple of the Lord in the Holy City, Jerusalem at a Holy Time is the setting for the first annunciation. Nazareth, a despised city (John 1:46) and at no special time of day is the setting of the second. In the context of scarcity, the reader attends to lengthy descriptions. The descriptions alert the reader to theological and literary significance for the two annunciation scenes.⁶

Descriptive scarcity establishes a literary context for meaning. How can learners experience this

⁶ Through this contrast of advantages versus disadvantages coupled with the two responses to the angels’ announcements, Luke establishes in a literary fashion the theme of Mary’s song. The narrative supports the overt theme of the song. The poem gives voice to an inherent theme of the contrasting stories.

concept so that it is more than an idea? Lesson Two attempts such a feat, please come along with me as we seek to translate an idea into an experience.

Lesson Two: How the Context of Scarcity Grants Meaning to Narratives

The evangelists' response to what we have called 'descriptive scarcity,' the simple fact that *more space meant greater cost* establishes the context for interpreting biblical narratives. Rather than some limitation of the author's imagination, or vocabulary, or interest, or artistry, or story-telling skill shrinking his use of description, the size of his canvas establishes the boundaries, sets the limits to his attention to detail. Most college students understand the straightforward concept that limits on document length influence writing. They are accustomed to crafting academic papers of varying lengths with varying amounts of content. Limitation in length for academic papers is usually an important component of their college or university experience. The idea that the evangelists had to balance the substance and limitations, the storyteller's passion for dramatic embellishments with a poor man's purse seems to come easily to my students. They get the primary idea. What I want for them is the experience of discovering how that context of scarcity becomes the narrative artist's tool, not just a limitation.

In preparation for the lesson on the evangelists' use of scarcity as a literary tool, I assign the reading of Mark 1-8 and a brief exercise in the development of a graph based on the reading. Each student develops a graph of the ratio of verses-about-miracles (these would include summary statements, like Mark 1:32-34 or 3:7-12) to verses-not-about-miracles per chapter. Because we are investigating a literary phenomenon, I ask that they include all the verses in an episode of a miracle in the 'miracle' category. So, for instance, Mark 1:21-22, and 1:27-28 should be included with Mark 1:23-26 as 'miracle' material, even though they do not specifically contain a miracle, because those verses belong to the episode. As a third component of the

assignment, in a different color, I ask that they also graph the total number of verses per chapter devoted to Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection, whether in the form of Jesus' predictions about those events or as narrative descriptions of the actual passion, death, burial, and resurrection of our Lord. Finally, we include the theophany scenes as the fourth element of the graph. I supply the following information: three verses in chapter 1 are devoted to theophany, twelve in chapter 9, and all eight verses of the final chapter.

At the beginning of the next class period, I ask to see the graphs. In that period, I teach a brief presentation on narrative scarcity. We review together the content of Mark 1-8. I teach on the demonic-angelic cosmic motif as cultural background for the Gospels⁷ and do a close examination of Mark's account of the stormy sea crossing as an example of a transformation of narrative meaning when the account is viewed from a contemporary postmodern worldview and then from a New Testament religious cultural perspective. For the next class, I require the reading of Mark 9-16 and a continuation of the graph for those chapters. As a final portion of the homework assignment, I assign a single page 'ten observations on the chart' paper.

Next class, we begin exploring together how Mark uses his limited resource of narrative space. I ask the class: 'How does the evangelist use his small canvas? Upon what does he focus?' "Large parts of Chapters 1 and 2, 5 and 6 are devoted to episodes of miracles," one might say. 'Can you see any changes in the way Mark uses his limitations of space as he develops his gospel?' Another student may say, "He introduces the topics of suffering, death, and resurrection in chapter 8, devotes a quarter of the verses in chapter 12, then gives over the account to those topics partway through chapter 14 all the way to the conclusion of the gospel." I ask, 'What signals the change from concentration upon Jesus' miracles to interest in the Passion

⁷ For a classic source for these ideas, see James W. Kallas, *The Significance of the Synoptic Miracles*. Greenwich, CT: Seabury, 1961.

and Resurrection?’ “I think Mark used the transfiguration theophany as part of the transition,” says one. I might reply, ‘How do the theophanies structure the gospel? In what way does descriptive scarcity offer a context for this shift? What does the shift mean? Are there other indicators of the shift to a focus on Jesus’ identity as Son of Man and the ongoing confusion of His disciples?’ With questions that probe the meaning of the evangelist’s choices in the context of scarcity, we explore the gospel.

Descriptive Scarcity: What *You* Need to Know

Robert Alter offers four general characteristics of biblical narratives: *words*, *actions*, *dialogue*, and *narration*. Given descriptive scarcity, he suggests that simply the use of words gives the selected words special significance. Repetition of a word or phrase exaggerates its thematic significance. As mentioned earlier for instance, Mark salts the second half of his account with Jesus’ words about his passion, death, and resurrection, then describes the actual events in detail (8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34, 45; 12:1-11; 14:1-16:8). Clearly, Mark uses the repeated use of the predictions, coupled with their long detailed description to emphasize the literary and theological importance of Jesus’ suffering, crucifixion, and victory over death.

A second example of repetition appears in Luke. Three times the evangelist recounts Jesus’ words, a verbatim echo, “Your faith has saved you (7:50; 17:19; 18:42).” The words address three outsiders: a notorious sinner whose association with Jesus prompted a religious leader to question His status as a true prophet, a leprous and therefore doubly despised Samaritan, and a blind beggar on the dangerous Jericho road (Luke 10:30). Luke wants his readers to see that God sprinkles the gift of faith outside religious precincts, among the despised, and upon those living at the edges of danger. Scarcity amplifies the significance of every word –

and especially the thematic significance of repetitions. Through repetition, the evangelists exploit descriptive scarcity to advance their literary, theological, and pastoral agendas.

Actions include episode recurrence, parallels, and analogy. Recurrences provide readers with comparable episodes that carry theological and literary weight. Three times Luke retells Paul's conversion (Acts 9:1-19; 22:2-22; 26:1-23). These recurrences allow the reader to compare and contrast the specifics detailed in each account, their settings and audiences, and how they solidify and confirm Paul's apostolic calling and ministry. In the narrator's first version, while he shows Paul (Saul) speaking with the Lord Jesus, Luke attends far more to Jesus' conversation with Ananias. In their dialogue, Jesus confirms Paul's ministry to the Gentiles. This information becomes one of the many puzzle pieces that the Spirit uses to convince the Church to receive the Gentiles sans circumcision and the practice of Moses' laws (Acts 15). In his account of the Jerusalem council, Luke places Paul's testimony to God's activity in signs and wonders among the Gentiles between Peter's report of the events at Caesarea and Joppa (Acts 10) and James proposal. By being revealed through Ananias' report of his conversation with the Lord, Paul's ministry is 'objectivized,' that is, seen not simply as his own subjective experience, but confirmed by a reluctant witness.

In the second recurrence (Acts 22), Luke details more of Paul's initial conversation, in part, to support an important theological point, that the first report was not intended to be an exhaustive account. Here, Luke defends Paul's ministry as genuine apostle by implying greater opportunity for Jesus to teach Paul even in this initial vision on the Damascus Road. Luke furthers this objective by reporting another revelation of Jesus to Paul, this time in the Temple in Jerusalem. In the third echo, Luke recounts the longest post-resurrection speech by the victorious Christ Jesus. To the Church's confirmatory word through Ananias, Luke adds Jesus'

direct message of His intent for Paul to be a witness (μαρτυρα) who declares what he has seen. Further and significantly, Jesus sends (ἀπόστειλλω) Paul as apostolic witness.

Each telling contributes to Luke's defense of Paul's ministry as genuine apostle of Christ Jesus. In Acts 9, Luke confirms Paul's ministry through a reluctant witness. The second telling strengthens the defense by implying that the Lord Jesus had greater opportunity to teach Paul initially – and by reporting another time that Jesus taught him. Finally, in the third account, Luke reports Jesus' use of language that lays a firm foundation for Paul's claim to apostolic authority. Each account contributes to this purpose. Repetitions in the context of descriptive scarcity amplify their significance.

Alter describes another form of action, *analogy*, “where one part of the story provides a commentary or a foil on another (p. 180).” In Luke, the evangelist uses the annunciation and birth of John the Baptizer to provide a literary foil for the first annunciation, the birth, and then the second angelic annunciation at Jesus' birth. Given the honor and respect held for prophet and martyr John by the first-century church, the episodes of a lesser faith response of his father compared with Mary (Luke 1:18-23 vs. 1:26-38), his own prenatal response to Jesus' presence in Mary's womb (1:39-45), and the contrast between simply an earthly celebration at John's birth with the earthly *and* heavenly celebrations at Jesus' (1:57-66 vs. 2:8-20) – all amplify the significance of Jesus' nativity. Luke uses events from John's early life as a foil for Jesus' life. Luke emphasizes the significance of the Incarnation via comparison to the events surrounding John's birth.

In his discussion, Alter notes that *dialogue* reveals the character of the various speakers. In his gospel, John relies heavily on dialogue. He reveals aspects of Jesus' character through a series of dialogues – for instance with Nicodemus, His spiritual authority (John 3) and with the

Samaritan woman, His gentle and perceptive winsomeness (John 4), or with the blind man, His patience (John 9) and with Simon Peter, His unrelentingly tough love (John 21). In Mark 7 when a Gentile, a Syrophenecian woman requests a healing for her little daughter from Jesus, He rebuffs the petition, “Let the children be satisfied first, for it is not proper to throw their bread to the dogs.” Her quick wit and unflinching chutzpah also reveal her confident faith in Jesus’ goodness and power with the words, “Yes, Lord, but even dogs lick crumbs from under the children’s table.” Her response grants Mark the opportunity to open the eyes of his readers to profound wisdom: Jesus rewards persistent faith in the face of (seeming) denial. Dialogue reveals character of the various actors. It also becomes a window into character of the Lord Jesus. Dialogue consumes precious space. By using dialogue, the evangelists telegraph the theological and literary significance of the speeches. Within the context of scarcity, the evangelists’ use of dialogue sheds a bright light on what they consider important.

Alter describes the most distinctive feature of biblical *narration* as “the way in which omniscience and inobtrusiveness are combined (p. 183).” He concludes:

The very mode of narration conveys a double sense of a total coherent knowledge available to God (and by implication, to His surrogate, the anonymous authoritative narrator) *and* the necessary incompleteness of human knowledge, for which much about character, motive, and moral status will remain shrouded in ambiguity.
(*my emphasis*, p. 184)

In a single sentence as an example, Luke tells his audience that Barnabas sold a tract of land and gave the entire sale price to the church (Acts 4:36-37). In contrast (signaled by the adversative δε), Ananias and his wife Sapphira sold property and pretended to give the entire purchase price to the church. Luke reveals his narrative omniscience of the conspiracy of deception through two clauses, “with his wife’s full knowledge” and “bringing a portion of the price.” To the narrator’s omniscience, an omniscience that echoes divine knowledge, Luke

shocks the reader with Peter's participation in supernatural knowledge as he confronts first Ananias then Sapphira with their deceit. Likewise, one evangelist reports Herod's internal regret for beheading John the Baptizer (Mark 6:26); another records Pilate's internal awareness that envy motivated Jesus' accusers (Matthew 27:18). By participating in an all-knowing perspective, each evangelist can simply report thoughts and feelings without consuming large areas of his canvas with dialogues. The mode of narration serves to include important story content, but with minimal investment of the resource of space. Each of these four characteristics of biblical narratives functions within the limitation we call descriptive scarcity. Scarcity allows the chroniclers to amplify the most significant narrative and theological elements of Jesus' life and ministry.

A Summary and a True Story

All of the components of a given narrative unit reveal the big idea, the concept that a narrator desires to teach his readers. The stories he tells embody the big ideas. Narrative analysis seeks to understand how the various episodes and their story elements contribute to the evangelist's Spirit-filled, artistic rendering of Jesus' life and ministry. To apply narrative analysis requires submission to the text, attention to detail, appreciation of the writers' skills, and prayerful and patient listening to the ideas of other believers, one's own intuitions, and above all else the Spirit. Big ideas narration takes place in the context of descriptive scarcity. While scarcity implies limits, the limits do not restrict the creativity of the authors. The evangelists used scarcity as a means to highlight specific words or speeches, or as a context to offer episodic foils or to amplify the significance of repetitions.

By asking students to create a teaching from a library of stories, they gain insights into the creative processes of instructing via narrative resources. By plotting out the way that Mark

uses his limited canvas, learners appreciate how scarcity forces the writers to use the limitation to serve their teaching. Through assignments, creative and visual, students learn two major concepts of narrative analysis. We teach narrative analysis so that learners can examine biblical narratives with integrity and appreciation for the author's skills in teaching truth. More importantly, we equip students with tools to mine more accurately the lodes of biblical narratives for their own sanctification, or to change the metaphor for their own life restorying. Please be encouraged by Maria's story, a story I heard from a research participant in an interview project on faith development and biblical narratives. She demonstrates how one might use biblical narrative materials to rewrite one's own story.

Maria intentionally and consciously used the Old Testament narrative of Joseph as a means of ascribing meaning to her personal faith adventure that crashed on the shoals of disappointment. Maria believed that in the context of a year-long mission in a school in Ghana, her dream would come into fruition. She discovered, rather, that not only her dream, but her perspectives on ministry as a missionary, on leadership, even on ethical uses of resources were compromised by what she witnessed. Disappointments with the actions of leaders eroded confidence in her dream and challenged the foundations of her faith. After she studied and meditated on the life of Joseph, she recaptured hope in her dream. Maria describes how she was able to recover from the disappointments of that year. She told me:

It's about being obedient to wherever you're placed, which is where the story of Joseph comes in. The story of Joseph consistently ministered to me, specifically in the year after I got back from Ghana. I spent time just studying, really studying that story, and realizing, he was faithful wherever he was placed. He was in prison for years and the Lord still used him there. I was thinking about how in each season of my life, I want to be a person who's faithful, even while in 'prison,' even when circumstances are hard. In my study, I saw how the Lord had given him a dream, a vision when he was young, which is what I felt like I had [a vision, a dream], but then a lot of disillusionment came in for him along the way, oppression and false accusation and, not that I have those exact experiences.

Using her knowledge of the Bible, Maria selected, then meditated on the Joseph narratives and used them to complete the account of her disappointing year of mission work. She used Joseph's story, a story fraught with disappointments that ultimately led to great opportunities, to imagine another ending to *her* story laced with disappointments, a redemptive ending:

In the first year after I returned from Ghana, I knew Joseph's story inside and out. In that year I really studied it and reflected upon it and thought about it in relation to my life. You know, [while he was living his disappointments], he didn't know the end of the story. This was the first time that clicked for me; he didn't know he was going to be second in command of Egypt. He didn't know how the Lord was going to use him. For me it was important to think through how long he was in each place, 'cause again, you just read one sentence, "He was in prison."

I spent time thinking through how Joseph had to process his oppression from his brothers, how he had to process, "Why am I suffering?" and "Where's God?" How he comes to see what God was doing. He was brought to a position to understand his brothers' betrayal and say to them, "What you intended for evil, God made into good."

In the context of narrative scarcity, a context that amplifies the importance of dialogue, Maria saw the big idea in Joseph's speech. Like Joseph, Maria did not, in fact still does not know the ending of her story. Instead of persisting in her story of the failure of the evangelical ideal of exemplary faith in the mission field, she took Joseph's example as the paradigm of response. Just as he did not know the outcome of his story, she did not know how God might use her life events. Since Joseph maintained moral integrity *and* developed and used his leadership gifts in his difficult circumstances, Maria saw new possibilities for her life and ministry – and a new audience from whom to seek approval, God Himself. Maria used the big idea of Joseph's story to complete her own.

As I thought about him, I found myself admiring Joseph as a leader, for his integrity, for his ability to flee temptation, his ability to do what was right, even though he didn't understand how the circumstances would turn out. To me his life was a huge challenge

to be a leader like him. I want to be a good follower when I'm placed in a situation where I have to follow, a situation where I don't necessarily agree with what's going on. His response causes me to ask, How can I be faithful? Thinking about Joseph and how his story applies to my life and ministry gives me a whole new way of seeing ministry as being faithful wherever we're placed, even if it's a secular workplace.

The year after Africa was a really interesting year of being creative with ministry, not seeing ministry as black and white. I learned I do not have to have the title of missionary or have to have the admiration of other people. I do not have to send out newsletters, so others can see all the cool things I'm doing. I learned ministry is just seeking God's approval. I began to see my secular workplace as a ministry, just the same way Joseph, rose to ministry in his secular workplaces.

Just as Joseph's good service sometimes found favor – and sometimes went unnoticed or worse -by human 'management,' Maria made it her goal to seek God's approval and let human approbation wax or wane as it will. The year in Ghana was not the only challenge to her dream of leadership in the Church. Maria described how the dream came to her – as the result of the perceptive ministry of a youth pastor who fostered and developed leadership gifts in her. She describes her disillusionment, not only as the result of the year in Africa, but because of her experiences within the church of being passed over for leadership development after college, passed over so young men with less potential could receive that attention. Maria believed her gifts were neglected because she is a woman.

However, I still struggled with part of my disillusionment. Even from an early age, I have felt God has given me this dream, this vision, a call to ministry, a passion for Him, a dream of using my gifts for Him. While working the secular job, I went through a period of disillusionment. How come this dream isn't happening? How come it's not coming true? And so looking at Joseph again helped me realize that each season was not in vain. The Lord uses each season. Had the Lord put Joseph as second in command of Egypt when he was younger, then catastrophe would probably result. That would have been terrible. Each season enriched his life and each season taught him something about leadership, about how to govern, about God. What I saw in Joseph continues to minister to me as I go through each season of life, and feeling not completely released to do my vision. I understand that his dream became real much later in Joseph's life, and once he was released, he was ready, because of all the other things that had happened.

So again seeing his story helps me view my life, not that I am Joseph and one day I'm going to be vice president or something, but just that it shows God's character and how He uses certain circumstances to form us. Nothing comes into our lives in vain; each

season is important. I think He hasn't yet released my dream of full time ministry and impacting people, because I'm not ready. So I ask, What else do I need to learn? How can I be faithful with where I'm placed?

Maria finds solace for her disillusionment, because in the Joseph narrative, movement toward his dream really was a straight line. His arrow flew straight at the bull's eye - and through experiences that developed and prepared him, experiences that must have felt tangential or misdirected, but which solidified his gifts and strengthened his character. Her experiences, too, propel her toward her goal, even though they feel 'off track.' Maria attended to the Joseph narrative. As she studied and meditated on the narrative, she imaginatively entered into the story and used it to rewrite her own story. Its big idea became her big idea. Narrative analysis offers a disciplined approach to investigate the big ideas of biblical narratives as the learner attends to the meanings that the context of descriptive scarcity amplifies. Done well, narrative analysis provides textually accurate renderings of Bible stories, the raw materials that the Holy Spirit uses to transform lives.

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