

250 Words

“250 Words” is a series of extremely brief essays on certain aspects of Biblical Hebrew narrative techniques, which I regularly publish in our university periodical *Universalia*. These essays may have been changed from the form they had when they were first published. Some of these miniatures are the reflex of earlier publications of mine, others are the result of work in progress. They do not aspire to more than to cause pleasure to their readers, as they did to their author, and I sincerely hope they will do just that.

250 Words. Notes and Thoughts about Biblical Hebrew Narrative:

XII. Who Killed Uriah?

Jan-Wim Wesselius

We are used to thinking that King David let his army commander Joab kill, albeit indirectly, his faithful servant Uriah the Hittite in the war against the Ammonites, lest David's adultery with Uriah's wife Bathsheba come to light. After all, God himself appears to state as much in 2 Sam. 12:9. A close reading of 2 Sam. 11 suggests that the situation is somewhat more complex. The narrator suggests to us that David and Joab are both very nervous through the lack of logic and coherence in their words. In a real battle it is impossible to retreat from one soldier as David orders Joab to do, the hypothetical reaction of King David as supposed by Joab in his words to the messenger is dysfunctional. But the messenger has nothing to be nervous about and tells David clearly what happened: whatever the place assigned to Uriah, his death was the result of a spontaneous attack towards the city of the Ammonites in pursuit of the enemy by David's soldiers. The Ammonite archers shot at them from the city wall and killed Uriah. So there is no causal connection between Joab's command in verse 16 and Uriah's death. David has ample reason to be relieved: he thinks he is innocent of Uriah's death. But God thinks differently and takes him to task.

250 Words. Notes and Thoughts about Biblical Hebrew Narrative

XI. David and Solomon

Jan-Wim Wesselius

On the surface the interchange between David and Solomon in 1 Kings 2:1-9 looks like an intimate conversation between a father at the end of his life and his pious son, but it is not that simple. The tension between father and son is highlighted in a peculiar manner, because David starts to speak about his commander Joab with the words 'You know what Joab son of Zeruiah did for (or against) me...'. We as readers know very well what Joab did for David: he had Uriah, the husband of Solomon's mother Bathsheba, killed when she was pregnant from David, but David continues in a completely different direction. Afterwards, Solomon gives no reaction whatsoever to his father's words. David speaks about Joab, Barzillai and Shimei, after his death Solomon decides the fate of Adonijah, Abjathar and Joab. Separately and much later he handles the case of Shimei. Father and son thus appear to deal with the same matters, but in reality each is pursuing his own aims. The persons David wants killed (Joab and Shimei) or rewarded (Barzillai) played a role in the revolt of his son Absalom, the nadir of his fortunes as king. The people Solomon kills (Adonijah and Joab) or banishes (Abjathar) were connected with Adonijah's abortive attempt to succeed David as king.

The narrator found a wonderful equilibrium between his message about David's sacred kingship and his continuing dynasty and the very human motives of David and Solomon.

250 words: Notes and thoughts about Biblical Hebrew narrative
X. Joseph and the Chief Baker
Jan-Wim Wesselius

While Joseph is in prison in Egypt, falsely accused of assaulting Potiphar's wife (Genesis 39), he explains the dreams of two courtiers who had been confined there also. To the chief butler he says that after three days his 'head will be raised': he will be released and returned to his former dignity.

Joseph's interpretation of the highly similar dream of the chief baker starts in exactly the same way: after three days his 'head will be raised', but in this case Joseph continues with saying that his head will be raised *above him*: the baker is to be hanged. We are just as surprised as the baker must have been. This is not a cruel joke aimed at the poor baker: Joseph is no sadist. It is a literary effect meant for us, the readers. We are thrown off our feet because the narrator of this story played a trick on us, completely disrupting our expectations. In this way he made us rethink the entire episode, as Joseph's words seem completely foreign to his character. Just because the Joseph who is presented to us in the book of Genesis would never do such a vicious thing, we are to conclude once more that as a dream-interpreter he was merely the instrument of divine revelation, as he had stated himself: 'Are not the interpretations from God?' (Gen. 40:8).

250 Words. Notes and Thoughts about Biblical Hebrew Narrative
IX. Horror on the border of two eras
Jan-Wim Wesselius

It has often been noted that there are striking literary agreements between elements of the horrific episode of the rape and death of the Levite's concubine and the slaughter of the Benjaminites, who refused to punish the perpetrators, in Judges 19-21, and earlier events in Israel's history. The tribe of Judah, which was to lead the campaign against Benjamin, was also the first to attack the Canaanites at the beginning of the book of Judges, the fight against the city of Gibeah looks like the episode of Ai in Joshua 7-8, and the events in Gibeah are similar to those in Sodom in Genesis 19. Sometimes even complete clauses and sentences are almost the same.

Various historical and literary explanations have been proposed, but none is really satisfactory. It seems preferable to assume that these intertextual connections mainly have a moral function. They indicate how the values of Israel had been perverted: Judah, which once led the attack against the Canaanites, now is in the van against its brother tribe Benjamin, the Israelites who used to fight against their enemies now combat their kinsmen, and the origin of all this is an atrocious act which is even worse than the crime of the people of Sodom in Abraham's days. The literary features of this episode confirm the right way to read it: not as an ordinary event, but as a horror story, the depth of depravity, which leads to the institution of the monarchy in Israel.

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VIII. The promise to David
Jan-Wim Wesselius

When David stated his intention to build a temple for the Lord, he put it in a very indirect way to the prophet Nathan, who understood and praised the plan. The next day, however, Nathan came with a message from the Lord, in which God rejected the idea, after reformulating

David's implicit plan as an explicit question: "Will (or: would) you build a house for me to live in?" (2 Samuel 7:5).

The question is ambiguous: depending on the place of the logical stress on each of the four main words ("you, build, house, for me") in this short sentence, it assumes four different meanings, which can be rephrased as sub-questions. David's request is completely rejected on all four of these points, but God's promise to David takes its place. (1) Do I need a *house*? No, I never asked for it while I wandered with the Israelites, but now I am going to give them a safe place to live. (2) Will *you* build? No, you won't, you have shed too much blood, but your son will build it. (3) Will you build a house *for me*? No, our relation is the other way round, and I will build a house (i.e. a dynasty) *for you*. (4) Do I need a house *to live in*? No, but there will be a house *for my name*.

We see how in this passage an artful type of language play is harnessed to the religious meaning of the text.

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VII. Melchizedek

Jan-Wim Wesselius

In Genesis 14, the story about the campaign of the kings of the East against Sodom, Gomorrah and the other cities of the Plain, Abram pursues and defeats them and brings back the people and possessions of these cities, beside liberating his nephew Lot. On his return he passes the location of Jerusalem, clearly recognizable because the King's Valley east of it is mentioned, though the name and presence of the city are omitted. The king of Sodom is set to meet him there. At that point the story is interrupted by Abram's encounter with Melchizedek, the priest-king of Salem, an alternative name for Jerusalem (14:18-20). In verse 21 the meeting with the king of Sodom continues where it broke off at the end of verse 17. Strangely, neither episode refers to the other. Many critical scholars supposed that the only explanation is that the Melchizedek episode was supposedly inserted in the coherent account of Abram's meeting with the king of Sodom. Others pointed out many literary connections between the accounts, the most striking of which is that Abram in his conversation with the king of Sodom in verse 22 echoes the words of Melchizedek of verse 19. What is happening here? It would seem that the narrator was playing with continuous and discontinuous features. The narrator bridged the deliberate narrative discontinuity in this passage by means of other connections between the two episodes, in order to give the first occurrence of Jerusalem in the Bible especial emphasis.

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VI. Rootless reports

Jan-Wim Wesselius

Every now and then, the Bible reader comes across a passage where one of the main persons reports a human or divine statement of great importance for the course of the history of Israel. Thus we see that the dying Jacob is said to have asked for forgiveness for his sons (Genesis 50:15-17), that Abner reminds the elders of Israel that God had promised to deliver his people through David (2 Samuel 3:17-18), that David had supposedly sworn to Bathsheba that her son Solomon was to be his successor (1 Kings 1:17), and that Jehu relays a divine utterance about Ahab (2 Kings 9:25-26). In all these cases (which can easily be added to), the report is treated as truthful (note that David even repeats Bathsheba's words in 1 Kings 1:30), whereas the event referred to is not found in the text as we now have it. There have been numerous critical explanations of this phenomenon, but if we study these cases together we see that this

is a literary technique. In the narrator's presentation, there is no doubt that the history of Israel took place according to God's plan, but he deliberately left open the option of an alternative, suspicious, reading, in which Bathsheba invented David's oath etc. Modern scholars who try, for example, to portray the "real" David on the basis of such readings, do not realize that they are merely following the lead of the narrator.

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V. The transition from Judges to 1 Samuel

Jan-Wim Wesselius

Within the chronological system of the Old Testament the note in 1 Kings 6:1, that Solomon built his Temple 480 years after the Exodus from Egypt, is of vital importance because there is no other way to connect the chronology of the monarchy with earlier events. There is indeed a deep chasm between the end of Judges with its cruel and distressing stories about the lawless situation in Israel before the monarchy and the beginning of 1 Samuel with the episode of the birth of Samuel. This discontinuity is marked in a very peculiar way. There is no narrative continuity between the two books, but there are many unexpected features tying the books together. Thus we see, for example, that the geography of the last chapters of Judges is echoed in the book of 1 Samuel. In both Gibeah, Ramah, Bethlehem, Shiloh, Mizpah, and Jerusalem play a role, though there is no clear connection between the events taking place in them. Saul's symbolic act of cutting his oxen into pieces and sending them to all the tribes of Israel (1 Samuel 11:6-7) reminds us of the Levite's shocking action with the body of his dead concubine in Judges 19:29.

The narrator both separated the books and connected them intimately through the application of this peculiar literary technique, and left it to the readers' imagination to think about the connection between the events described in them.

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IV. Judah and Tamar

Jan-Wim Wesselius

The story about Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38 clearly interrupts the Life of Joseph in Genesis 37-50, and there is no continuity at its beginning or its end. It is being framed by the last verse of chapter 37 and the first of 39, which both tell about Joseph being brought to Egypt. By contrast, the chapter is clearly connected in many ways with the life of Joseph, if only in the spiritual growth of Judah through his experience in this episode, the formal agreement of Judah's and Tamar's dialogue (38:25-26) with that between Jacob and his sons (37:32-33), and the resemblance of the sexually charged episodes in chapters 38 and 39.

Depending on the value which scholars assume for the elements of the argument, most assume either that Genesis 38 is a secondary insertion in a cycle of coherent stories dealing with Joseph, or that it belongs where it is now, with little attention being given to the signs of discontinuity, or a mixture of the two possibilities. I think we should consider the option that instead we are dealing here with a deliberate literary strategy to play with continuity and discontinuity.

This literary technique apparently stresses the function of Judah in the Life of Joseph and the importance of his offspring, who are the origin of the tribe of Judah, the one group of the people of Israel who were to continue its culture and religion.

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III. Who sold Joseph to Egypt?

Jan-Wim Wesselius

The caravan traders who play a role in the story of Joseph being sold to Egypt in Genesis 37 are called by two different names: Ishmaelites and Midianites. Are these groups identical? If they are, the subject of “they pulled Joseph up out of the pit, and they sold Joseph for twenty pieces of silver to the Ishmaelites, who brought Joseph to Egypt” (Gen. 37:28), must be Joseph’s brothers, who followed Judah’s advice: “Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, but let us not do away with him ourselves” (37:27). If they are not, however, the brothers only followed Reuben’s earlier proposal to throw Joseph into a pit (37:22), from where the Midianites of verse 28, before Judah’s advice could be acted upon, “pulled Joseph up out of the pit, and they sold Joseph for twenty pieces of silver to the Ishmaelites, who brought Joseph to Egypt”.

The ambiguity identifies two different narrative voices, which are heard side-by-side throughout the story of Joseph’s life. One could say that Joseph was “stolen from the land of the Hebrews” (40:15), the other one that he reproached his brothers for selling him to Egypt (45:5). One lets Reuben play the main role and keeps telling that Joseph had simply disappeared, the second one makes Judah the protagonist among the brothers, and the ruse of the blood-stained garment for hiding their direct involvement is mentioned. The two different names for the merchants serve to make this ambiguity possible.

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II. Ziba and Mephibosheth

Jan-Wim Wesselius

Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan and grandson of king Saul, lived uneasily at David’s court. David had ordered Ziba, a servant of Saul’s, to provide for him. Ziba was clearly not happy with this arrangement. During prince Absalom’s revolt against his father, Ziba arrived with supplies for the fleeing David, and told him that Mephibosheth hoped to become king himself. David reacted by giving all Mephibosheth’s possessions to Ziba.

On David’s return, however, Mephibosheth declared that Ziba had stolen the supplies which he had intended for the king. David then decided that the two would have to divide the estate between them, a decision which has surprised many readers (2 Samuel 19:29). Biblical scholars have often tried to determine whose account is true, in agreement with the commonly accepted idea that biblical texts have only one correct meaning.

The authors of the Bible, however, played with texts and their meanings, not for fun but to transmit their message as clearly as possible. There is no solution or best interpretation here: we have not been given enough clues to decide who is speaking the truth.

On the surface, both present a coherent story. On a deeper level, the reader explores their supposed secret selfish motives. The real meaning is that both scenarios lead to assistance arriving for David in the hour of distress. Just as David himself, we cannot decide between the two, but the outcome is the same: we see God’s acting in history confirmed as David’s dynasty was saved.

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I. David’s lament for Saul and Jonathan

Jan-Wim Wesselius

The structure of David’s lament for Saul and Jonathan in 1 Samuel 1:19-27 is complex and a lot has been written about it. I think we can understand this poem through a close reading of the text, finding out what literary strategy is employed. Until verse 25 the chiasmic structure of

the poem is perfect: daughters of Israel against daughters of the Philistines, the heights of Israel against Mt Gilboa. The mention of the weapons of Saul and Jonathan in verses 21-22 makes us therefore expect: “How are the mighty fallen, and the weapons of battle perished!” as the last line of the poem, and that is what happens – but only in verse 27, after some unexpected words: “How are the mighty fallen in the midst of the battle! Jonathan lies slain upon your [Israel’s] heights. I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; very pleasant have you been to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women”. This passage thus completely interrupts the expected course of the poem, but is connected to it through use of the same words: battle, slain, your heights, pleasant and love are all found elsewhere in the poem also. This is a literary technique of attraction and repulsion which reminds us that David never before uttered his feelings for Jonathan: now his emotions break through and turn a conventional dirge for the dead king and his son into a personal lament for the lost friend. Form and content combine in a striking and moving composition.