Story as Torah

Reading the Old Testament Ethically

Gordon J. Wenham

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ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
AnBib	Analecta Biblica
ANET	*Ancient Near Eastern Texts*
Bib	*Biblica*
Bib Int	*Biblical Interpretation*
BN	*Biblische Notizen*
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
ConBOT	Coniectanea Biblica Old Testament Series
ET	English translation
EvQ	*Evangelical Quarterly*
Exp Tim	*Expository Times*
ICC	International Critical Commentary
Int	*Interpretation*
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JETS	*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
JJS	*Journal of Jewish Studies*
JPS	Jewish Publication Society
JSNT	*Journal for the Study of the New Testament*
JSOT	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*
JSOTSup	JSOT Supplement Series
OTL	Old Testament Library
RIDA	*Revue Internationale des Droits de l'Antiquité*
TDOT	*Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*
TynBul	*Tyndale Bulletin*
UF	*Ugarit-Forschungen*
VT	*Vetus Testamentum*
VTSup	Vetus Testamentum Supplements
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WTJ	*Westminster Theological Journal*
ZAW	*Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*

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1

INTRODUCTION

For centuries Jews have read the Bible didactically drawing from its stories moral and legal principles to guide daily life. Encouraged by Jesus and Paul (Matt 19:4; 1 Cor 10:11) and common ancient practice,[1] Christian teachers and preachers have similarly read the Old Testament with a view to using its stories to instil ethical principles in their hearers.

However, some of the lessons drawn from these texts are arbitrary and whimsical at the one extreme and banal at the other. Augustine's delightful and witty interpretation of the flood story may be right to compare the ark to the Church, for both act as means for saving the human race, but to suggest that the occupants of the three decks of the ark represent 'chaste marriage dwelling in the ground floor, chaste widowhood in the upper, and chaste virginity in the top storey'[2] is a trifle fanciful. But he would allow even 'better' interpretations, so long as the connection with the Church is recognised.

Augustine thus implicitly allows that his allegorical interpretation is subjective, a stance that has recently become most evident in postmodern approaches to Scripture which stress that the reader creates the meaning of the text. At times this leads to bizarre and counter-intuitive readings. The contemporary stress on the reader's involvement in the interpretative process is of course valid, but to argue that it is entirely subjective is misguided. A text is essentially a message from an author to its first readers, which the author hoped would be understood and acted on. Because both readers and author shared a common language and culture, there was a reasonable chance that the writer's intentions would be realised and the message understood correctly. Our distance in time and space from the author and first readers makes it much more difficult to pick up the original sense of the message. However, just as readers of modern texts, whether they be e-mails or scholarly tomes, do their best to grasp the author's intended sense, so responsible interpreters of ancient texts have tried to do the same.

But there are formidable difficulties. In narrative it is often unclear whether the writer is making an ethical comment at all: he may be describing an action because it happened, or because it was a link in a

[1] 'In all those cultures, Greek, medieval or Renaissance . . . the chief means of moral education is the telling of stories.' Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1981), 114.

[2] Augustine, *City of God*, 15.26.

chain of events, which led to something significant. Furthermore, in those cases where narratives appear more than descriptive and seem to be offering ethical advice, it is often very difficult to be sure where the writer and his 'implied reader'[3] stand ethically. We have difficulty determining their moral standpoint, so we often cannot be sure whether deeds recounted are meant to serve as examples to imitate or mistakes to avoid.

Partly for these reasons systematic discussions of Old Testament ethics have avoided the narratives, focusing instead on the direct ethical teaching that is found in the legal codes in the Pentateuch, the exhortations of the Wisdom literature and the preaching of the prophets.[4] These texts of course provide invaluable insights into the ethical outlook of the biblical writers, but there have been surprisingly few attempts made to integrate these insights with the storytellers' purposes and perspectives except on an *ad hoc* basis to interpret individual stories. Serious biblical scholarship has traditionally been concerned almost entirely with historical questions, how and when the text originated, what it tells us about Israel's political and religious history, and so on. The purpose of the writer in telling particular stories and the message that a particular book was intended to convey has been given a low profile in biblical study, and where it has been discussed the focus has been on a work's theology rather than its ethical stance.

Thus interpretations of Genesis tend to see it as a book about creation, fall and the call of the patriarchs. Yet in the Bible Genesis is seen as the first book of the *law* (*Torah*), although it is nearly all narrative. Jesus and Paul, Jewish rabbis and Christian preachers, all appeal to Genesis to demonstrate truths about human behaviour and draw out principles of ethics. More adventurous souls try to use books like Judges to illuminate both theology and ethics despite its horrendous storyline and generally depressing conclusions. Genesis certainly looks as though it may be trying to teach ethics as well as theology, but there are quite contradictory conclusions drawn by eminent scholars as to what that ethic is. And as for more popular expositors the comment of Judges on the chaos of its own times might well be applied to interpretations of Genesis! 'In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes' (Judg 21:25).

This book will try to trace a path through this tangled area. While fully recognising that the reader makes an indispensable contribution to interpretation and that the whole issue of authorial intentionality is fraught with difficulty, we shall employ the methods of historical,

[3] For a definition of 'implied reader' see Chapter 2.

[4] The otherwise most useful volume E. Otto, *Theologische Ethik des Alten Testaments* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1994) has nothing about the ethics implicitly taught in the narratives.

literary and rhetorical criticism to investigate what the original author of a biblical book was trying to communicate to his first readers. Historical criticism is required because every work originated at a specific time in a particular culture, so that if we do not understand the sense of the words in that period and what concepts and institutions they refer to we shall never grasp the message the work was written to convey. The techniques of literary criticism are necessary to appreciate the organisation of a piece of literature, the ideas it embodies, and the standpoint of the writer. Rhetorical criticism links the concerns of literary and historical criticism. It attempts to show how an author writing in a particular context organised his work to try to persuade his readers to respond in the way he wanted. Rhetorical criticism uses the observations of literary critics to illuminate the communicative and persuasive techniques built into every text.[5]

This will lead us to conclude that Old Testament narrative books do have a didactic purpose, that is, they are trying to instil both theological truths and ethical ideals into their readers. A closer examination of Genesis and Judges will attempt to elucidate what the purposes of these two books are. I shall argue that the Bible storytellers are not advocating a minimalist conformity to the demands of the law in their storytelling, rather that they have an ideal of godly behaviour that they hoped their heroes and heroines would typify.[6] But the attainment of these ideals seems to be erratic, and this has important implications for the theology of the storytellers: they appear to relate a story of success despite the frequent moral failings of the principal actors in the story.

Before exploring this in more depth, it is necessary to fill out the picture of the ethical ideals of the writers. This involves an examination of a variety of texts. Most important for an understanding of Genesis are the opening chapters, particularly chapters 1–2, which describe the world as it was first created, before mankind disobeyed: it thus serves as a vision of God's ideals for the human race, a vision that is presumably shared by the author of Genesis. But this is not enough to cover all aspects of human existence and the appropriate ethical approach to them. We shall try to identify patterns of behaviour in the narratives which the authors seem to be implicitly commending and so draw out what they consider to be virtues. Further light on these issues may be derived from the exhortations and other expressions of moral ideals,

[5] In this respect M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985) offers the best general synthesis of the methods of historical, literary, and rhetorical criticism, and Y. Amit, *The Book of Judges: The Art of Editing* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Bialik, 1992; ET, J. Chipman, Biblical Interpretation Series 38, Leiden: Brill, 1999) its most convincing application to a Bible narrative book.

[6] This idea is hinted at in the paradigms of behaviour in W. Janzen, *Old Testament Ethics: A Paradigmatic Approach* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994).

which are scattered through the pentateuchal law codes, the Psalms and the Wisdom literature. These originated at different times and in different circles, so it is not at all certain that they have the same ethical outlook as each other or as the narrative texts, but given the sparsity of information on some aspects of thought we shall assume homogeneity of outlook if heterogeneity is not demonstrable. Notwithstanding the critical problems of potentially different ethical standards in different periods, it emerges that throughout the Old Testament much more is expected of the righteous than merely keeping the letter of the law. Its writers hoped that in some way man, made in the image of God, would in some measure imitate God, his creator, in maintaining creation and in loving his fellow man. 'Be holy, for I am holy', the motto of Leviticus, sums up this aspect of Old Testament ethics.

This reconstruction of the ethical world-view of some Old Testament writers provides the background for a rereading of some problematic stories of Genesis and Judges, such as the Rape of Dinah (Gen 34), and the Gideon cycle (Judg 6–9). It will become apparent that the biblical writers do not merely assess these characters against the requirements of the law codes but against the ideals we have sketched in the preceding chapter (Chapter 5).

Obviously the behaviour of the chief actors in many instances falls miserably short of the ideal, and they often suffer in some way for their mistakes. Yet it is clear too that they are not deserted by God despite their sinfulness. So there is a paradox in Old Testament narrative ethics: on the one hand God is terribly demanding, he looks for nothing less than godlike perfect behaviour, yet on the other, despite human failings, he does not forget his covenant loyalty to his people, and ultimately brings them through the suffering that their sin has brought about. Old Testament ethics are therefore as much about grace as about law: they declare that God, the all-holy, is also God, the all-merciful.

Thus in many ways the fundamental principles of Old Testament ethics are much closer to the New Testament than is often perceived. Both look for divine attributes to be replicated in humanity, but both realise that this rarely occurs and that the overwhelming need for the human race is divine mercy. In this way the incarnation fulfils the goals of the Old Testament system of ethics. But in other more subtle ways it modifies both the vision of God and attitudes to food, marriage and violence. In the final chapter we sketch some of the continuities and differences between the two testaments.

2

CRITICAL METHODOLOGY

In this work we shall investigate the ethical norms and values embodied in the stories of the Old Testament. This though is a field of intense debate, where historical and literary theories are locked in conflict. It would make our task easier if there were more agreement by biblical scholars on historical issues and by literary critics on methods of interpretation. But until the curse of Babel is reversed, and all again share the same scholarly discourse, we shall have to put up with a diversity of critical methods and pick our way carefully through the hubbub. Others of course may prefer a different path. So it is not the purpose of this chapter to claim that the methods and solutions proposed here are the only ones possible, but simply to clarify what approach is being followed.

Since the Enlightenment, biblical study has been dominated by the historical-critical method. As the term suggests, this method is chiefly concerned with historical issues, which are vital to an informed understanding of the Bible. We need to know as much as possible about the historical environment in which the biblical narratives are set in order to understand them properly. Their marriage customs and family structures were so different from ours, that if we do not recognise these differences we shall be in great danger of misreading even the most straightforward family stories. Similarly their attitudes to women, authority, work and God differ markedly from the outlook of modern Western readers. Without the historical awareness brought by a critical approach these texts are liable to serious misinterpretation, especially in the realm of ethics. Detailed historical studies of ancient Israel's social structure are a prerequisite to understanding the ethics of the Old Testament.[1] We have to have some understanding of life in Bible times to appreciate what the texts are saying about the situations of which they speak.

An historical approach is also required to understand the language of the Bible exactly. Like all languages Hebrew has evolved down the

[1] Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel* (ET, J. McHugh, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961); H. W. Wolff, *The Anthropology of the Old Testament* (ET, M. Kohl. London: SCM Press, 1974) and S. Bendor, *The Social Structure of Ancient Israel: The Institution of the Family from the Settlement to the End of the Monarchy* (Jerusalem: Simor, 1996) discuss in depth the social structures of Old Testament society.

years in its morphology, syntax, and lexicon: words changed their meaning over time, so that the meaning a word has in an early text may not be the same in a later text. It makes a difference, for example, whether the word *betulah* should be translated 'virgin' or 'teenage girl'.[2] Thus in the last hundred years the discovery of many texts in languages akin to biblical Hebrew, e.g. Ugaritic and Akkadian, has shed light on many terms in the Bible as well as illuminating the society and assumptions of the ancient Near East in the era in which the Bible was written.[3] Here the contribution of historical criticism has been invaluable.

Historical criticism is also essential for the dating of the biblical material. The main Old Testament story from Abraham to Malachi covers nearly two millennia, and unless we suppose that there was no historical development, it seems likely that language, attitudes and customs altered during this period. It is therefore vital to date the different biblical texts so that they are interpreted in a way that is appropriate both to the periods in which the texts originated and to the periods which they describe. Often too the date of composition may give a clue to the purpose of a text.

Historical criticism is often used to evaluate the historical reliability of a document or to distinguish the sources which have been used in the composition of a biblical book. But though many monographs have been devoted to these issues, they are marginal to a study of Old Testament narrative ethics. For we are not trying to write a history of behaviour in ancient Israel, answering such questions as: Was there a crime wave in the days of the judges? When was polygamy tolerated? or How did they wage war?[4] These are perfectly legitimate topics to explore, but they are incidental to the heart of the issue addressed here. What interests us is the stance of the biblical writers to the deeds they describe. Writers, whether of fact or fiction, write with a view to influencing their readers to think or act in a certain way. Authors convey their own outlook through their poetry or prose and seek to share it with their readers; they hope that as a result of their writing their readers will come to accept their own point of view to a greater or lesser extent. Indeed arguably one of the marks of great writers is that they write with persuasiveness convincing the reader of the rightness of their viewpoint. Since a study of narrative ethics is essentially an attempt to elucidate the writer's outlook, it usually matters very little whether the

[2] For discussion see M. Tsevat, 'Bethulah', *TDOT* 2: 338–43; G. J. Wenham, 'Betulah, "A Girl of Marriageable Age"', *VT* 22 (1972), 326–48.

[3] For discussion of principles see James Barr, *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968).

[4] For this sort of discussion see de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*; Gordon P. Hugenberger, *Marriage as Covenant* (VTSup 52, Leiden: Brill, 1994); Susan Niditch, *War in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

story that is told is fiction or history.[5] From an ethical perspective at least it makes little difference whether the book of Jonah is historical or fictional: in either case the author delights in mocking Jonah's folly at believing he could run away from God and in challenging his narrow-mindedness in supposing God cares only about the salvation of Israel.[6] Thus the preoccupation with historicity and fictionality that has characterised much historical criticism is quite peripheral to our study.

Source criticism is also marginal to a study of narrative ethics. It goes without saying that all but the shortest narrative works, from Genesis to Chronicles, drew on a variety of longer or shorter sources. Sometimes these sources can be specified with some degree of probability, at others it appears to be mere speculation. But very rarely does it matter. Whether the author of Genesis was working with three major sources, J, E and P, or with umpteen independent short stories, or with just one oral tradition which he committed to writing, the message of the book is the same, and we can still study the book in the same way to elucidate the author's ethical stance. If we were confident that we could distinguish one of the sources of Genesis in its entirety by dissecting the present text, we could theoretically study the ethics of that source. But this is easier said than done. We do not know what the author of Genesis has omitted from the source, but we do know that what he has preserved is refracted through his own ethical lens. This makes the attempt to discuss the stance of a source very problematic. It is also regarded by most readers of the Old Testament as unimportant. For both Jews and Christians it is the present books of the Hebrew Bible that are canonical, not their putative sources. They read the life of David as it is told in the books of Samuel and Kings, not in the so-called Succession Narrative (2 Sam 9 – 1 Kgs 2). The pious reader wants to know what the canonical author thought about the deeds of David and his entourage, not what the author of the Succession Narrative thought. This popular focus on the final form of the story is one that is shared by most modern scholarly narrative studies of these books.[7]

In the last twenty years biblical study has been transformed by the application of literary criticism to many texts. Numerous books and articles have appeared discussing specific texts[8] while many others have

[5] Cf. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 114.

[6] For a careful assessment of the genre of Jonah and its messages see J. Limburg, *Jonah: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1993).

[7] E.g. David M. Gunn, *The Story of King David: Genre and Interpretation* (JSOTSup 6, Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1978); *The Fate of King Saul: An Interpretation of a Biblical Story* (JSOTSup 14, Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1980); Lyle M. Eslinger, *Kingship of God in Crisis: A Close Reading of 1 Samuel 1–12* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1985).

[8] Cf. works mentioned in footnote 7; on Judges, Lillian R. Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges* (JSOTSup 68, Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988); Barry G. Webb, *The Book of the Judges: An Integrated Reading* (JSOTSup 46, Sheffield: JSOT

explored the techniques of biblical writers more generally, illustrating their observations by frequent reference to specific texts.[9] This type of study often draws attention to the ethical positions of the biblical writers, and where scholars have embraced standpoints quite different from the Bible (e.g. feminism or Marxism) it leads to very interesting critiques of assumptions embedded in the biblical texts. But it is rarely tackled systematically.[10]

I shall therefore in the rest of this chapter attempt to do three things. First, explain the insights and terminology that literary critics have brought to the understanding of texts. Second, explore the way in which writers seek to persuade their readers to adopt their ethical norms. Third, draw attention to some of these techniques at work in the Bible.

Texts are part of a communication process. In speech we can distinguish three main stages. In face-to-face conversation:

Speaker > Message > Listener

In this situation the possibility of a listener misunderstanding the message is reduced to a minimum, because he can always question the speaker if the message is obscure. But this may well not be the case if the message is written down: the reader has to read more carefully, for if the text came from a dead author, he cannot be questioned to check what he really meant. Interpreting texts is therefore intrinsically more difficult than understanding live speech. It may be represented as follows:

Author > Text > Reader

But literary critics hold that this is too simple a picture of the communication process especially when written texts are involved. They reformulate the situation thus:

Author > (Implied Author) > Text > (Implied Reader) > Reader

How does the implied author differ from the real author, and the implied reader from the real reader? When someone speaks or writes,

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Press, 1987); on Genesis, H. C. White, *Narration and Discourse in the Book of Genesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[9] Some of the most valuable studies are E. M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament*[2] (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1981); Jacob Licht, *Storytelling in the Bible* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1978); Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981); Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983); Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985); and Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (ET, D. Shefer-Vanson, JSOTSup 70, Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989).

[10] Sternberg in chapters 12–13 of his *Poetics* comes closest to what I am looking for.

he projects an image of himself and his attitudes that may differ considerably from what he is like in real life. Usually one suspects that the implied author is better than the real author. Politicians' speeches are full of high-flown rhetoric presenting themselves as trustworthy and devoted to social justice: sadly in real life some politicians do not live up to the image they project. If we rely solely on their speeches or writings to build up a picture of them and their views, we construct the 'implied author' as opposed to the real author. In dealing with biblical texts we are always dealing with the implied author not the real author, because all our knowledge of the author and his mind is derived from the texts themselves. We have no way of independently assessing whether the real Amos matched the Amos implied by the text of his prophecy. However the inaccessibility of the real authors to readers of the Bible is no obstacle to discussing its ethics, for it is precisely the norms and values embodied in the texts that we are trying to elucidate. These are the views of the implied author, which may or may not correspond to those of the real authors. Establishing the stance of the implied author is often difficult, but it is no problem for our study that we cannot reconstruct the real authors of our texts. Since in dealing with biblical texts we are always discussing only the implied author not the real author, we shall often for the sake of brevity refer to the 'author' where 'implied author' would be more exact.

The implied reader is a mirror image of the implied author. It is the reader presupposed by the author. There may be all sorts of readers who actually read the text, but when a writer writes or a preacher preaches a sermon he has a certain sort of reader or listener in mind. The writer makes a guess at his reader's knowledge, experience, and outlook and pitches his presentation to appeal to this implied reader. If a real reader is to grasp accurately what the writer is saying, he must approximate to this implied reader, otherwise he is likely to pick up the wrong end of the stick. 'It is only as I read that I become the self whose beliefs must coincide with the author's. Regardless of my real beliefs and practices, I must subordinate my mind and heart to the book if I am to enjoy it to the full.'[11]

But the central critical problem is to discover the implied author and his outlook. How do we determine his standpoint? We can illustrate the problem from the book of Job. In it we meet several characters, Job, God, the Satan, Job's wife, the comforters, and Elihu, as well as the narrator who sets the scene in chapters 1 and 2 telling us what happened in heaven and on earth. The narrator is also responsible for introducing each speech, 'Then Job (Bildad) answered', etc. and for the concluding summary in chapter 42.

[11] Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 138.