Evangelists might have "created" historical narrative by means of reflection on OT texts without reference to historical knowledge or tradition. One may refer more generally to E. Earle Ellis, *The Old Testament in Early Christianity: Canon and Interpretation in the Light of Modern Research,* WUNT 54 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1991).

The theological import of OT exegesis in NT writings has been explored especially along two lines. Of these the more prominent has featured the use of the OT in christological argument and reflection; see, for example, the titles of the volumes by Gundry, Marcus, and Bock mentioned above. This is also the focus of Donald Juel's examination of *Messianic Exegesis: Christological Interpretation of the Old Testament in Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988). But now an alternative voice has been provided by Richard B. Hays; in *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University, 1989) he contends that, at least in the case of Paul's approach to the Scriptures of Israel, the central concern is with the nature of the community of God's people as prefigured in the OT.

Literary theory and criticism has in the last two decades highlighted the relation of texts to other texts both at the level of the generation of meaning and at the level of interpretation. This "literary turn" and its promise for the practice of reading is developed in, for example, Thais E. Morgan, "Is There an Intertext in This Text? Literary and Interdisciplinary Approaches to Intertextuality," *AJS* 3 (1985) 1-40; John Hollander, *The Figure of Echo: A Mode of Allusion in Milton and After* (Berkeley: University of California, 1981); and Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (London: Routledge, 1981) ch. 5.

In biblical studies, the potential of a focus on intertextuality has been demonstrated more broadly by Michael A. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon/New York: Oxford University, 1985). In NT studies, one may refer to Gail R. O'Day, "Jeremiah 9:22-23 and 1 Corinthians 1:26-31: A Study in Intertextuality," *JBL* 109 (1990) 259-67; and again to Hays, *Echoes of Scripture.*

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# 12. *Narrative Criticism*

Mark Allan Powell

Narrative criticism focuses on stories in biblical literature and attempts to read these stories with insights drawn from the secular field of modern literary criticism. The goal is to determine the effects that the stories are expected to have on their audience.

In NT studies, narrative criticism is practiced with primary reference to the four Gospels and the Book of Acts.[1] No one will doubt that these books relate stories, but until recently literary-critical insights regarding stories and storytelling were largely ignored by scholars who studied these books.

Under the dominance of historical-critical scholarship, books of the Bible were often treated more as resources for historical reconstruction than as works of literature in their own right.[2] By using such methods as source criticism, form criticism, and redaction criticism, Gospel scholars were able to learn about the life and teaching of Jesus and to gain insight into the interests and concerns of the early Christians who produced the texts we now have concerning him. In the 1980s, however, the interests of these scholars expanded to include inquiry into the function of these texts as literature — that is, as forms of communication that affect those who receive or experience them.

For the most part, narrative criticism has not become a domain for those who reject the processes or conclusions of historical-critical scholar-

1. Epistles may also be studied in terms of the stories that lie behind the letters. See Norman R. Peterson, *Rediscovering Paul: Philemon and the Sociology of Paul's Narrative World* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

2. See Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University, 1974).

ship but has attracted those who feel that something other than historical criticism ought also to be done. Granted that the Gospels may function referentially as records of significant history, might they not also function poetically as stories that fire the imagination, provoke repentance, inspire worship, and so on? Or to put it another way, historical criticism may be said to treat biblical narratives as windows that enable us to learn something about another time and place; narrative criticism treats these same texts as mirrors that invite audience participation in the creation of meaning.[3] For the narrative critic, texts shape the way readers understand themselves and their own present circumstances.

## 1. Some Basic Principles

When Bible scholars turn to secular literary theory for guidance, they may encounter a frustrating cacophony of voices. The field of modern literary criticism encompasses a vast array of systems and methods that are based in turn on diverse hermeneutical conceptions concerning language and communication. The narrative criticism that is currently practiced in NT studies is an eclectic discipline that borrows from a number of areas, including rhetorical criticism, structuralism, and reader-response criticism. The method is still undergoing development, but some widely-accepted principles can be identified.

### *1.1 Implied Author*

Narrative criticism seeks to interpret texts with reference to their implied authors rather than with reference to their actual, historical authors. By "implied author," narrative critics mean the perspective from which the work appears to have been written, a perspective that must be reconstructed by readers on the basis of what they find in the narrative. In secular studies, the concept of the implied author was first developed by formalist critics who wished to interpret stories on their own terms without reference to anything extrinsic to the text itself.[4] Biographical information concerning

3. Murray Krieger, *A Window to Criticism: Shakespeare's Sonnets and Modern Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1964) 3.

4. Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (2d ed., Chicago: University of Chicago, 1983) 66-67.





the author's agenda or personality should not be imposed on the story. We may know that Jonathan Swift was concerned with the relations of Protestants and Catholics in Ireland, but since this issue is not explicitly addressed in *Gulliver's Travels* the meaning of that work should not be circumscribed by so limited an application. In fact, in literary studies, a "classic" is by definition a work that continues to be meaningful in times and places that were not originally envisioned by the author.

The concept of the implied author is significant for interpreting works that have multiple authors or are anonymous. Even a work that has no real author — such as a tale that developed over a period of time by being passed down from generation to generation — can be studied according to the perspective of its implied author.[5] Regardless of the process through which a narrative comes into being, it will always evince particular values, beliefs, and perceptions that can be described as representative of its implied author.

For narrative critics, then, questions concerning whether Luke's Gospel was written by a companion of Paul or whether the Evangelist drew some of his material from the Gospel of Mark or from a now lost Q document are irrelevant. These questions are significant for historical critics who wish to make judgments concerning the historical reliability of Luke's work or who want to determine the theological agenda of the Gospel's redactor. But they are not significant for appreciating and understanding Luke's Gospel as a completed work of literature that must, in any case, be interpreted from the perspective of its implied author.

### *1.2 Implied Readers*

Narrative criticism seeks to determine the expected effects of stories on their implied readers, without taking into account all of the possible effects that stories may have on actual readers. The concept of the implied reader parallels that of the implied author. The implied reader is one who actualizes the potential for meaning in a text, who responds to it in ways consistent with the expectations that we may ascribe to its implied author.

The concept of the implied reader is a heuristic construct that allows critics to limit the subjectivity of their analysis by distinguishing between their own responses to a narrative and those that the text appears to invite.

5. Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1978) 140.

Most of us already know how to do this in daily life. We may be offended by a story that we consider to be in poor taste and say, "I was supposed to think it was funny, but I didn't." Or we may be bored by a novel and say "I am supposed to find it scary, but I don't." In such instances we determine that we are expected to respond to these texts differently than we actually do. In literary terms, we are able to identify how the implied reader would respond even though our own responses as actual readers may be different.

On what basis do we make such determinations? We do not need the author to tell us outright that he or she expects us to find the story amusing or frightening. Rather, our perception of expected response is based on the recognition that stories intended to be funny or scary are usually told in particular ways. Similarly, narrative critics believe that attention to literary cues enables them to determine the effects that NT literature is expected to have on its implied readers.

Narrative critics differ from historical critics in that the latter usually seek to determine the effects that a document was intended to have on a particular set of actual readers, namely the community to which it was originally addressed. This focus on original readers typically defines the meaning of the text with more specificity than the approach of narrative criticism. When narrative critics determine the effects that a text is expected to have on its implied readers they often discover a range of meaning that may have diverse applications in a variety of contexts. Narrative criticism is therefore generally more open to *polyvalence* (plurality of meaning) than is historical criticism, though the concept of the implied reader places limits on this concept.

If historical criticism defines meaning with reference to the intended effect of a text on one particular set of readers, some schools of reader-response criticism seek to define meaning in ways that encompass all of the possible effects that a text may have on those who read it in any number of different contexts or situations. Narrative criticism occupies a middle ground on this continuum, seeking to define the range of potential meaning for the text's implied reader.

### *1.3 Normative Process of Reading*

In exploring the expected effects of texts on their implied readers, narrative critics make some assumptions about a normative process of reading. They assume, for instance, that the narrative is to be read sequentially and completely with all its parts being related to the work as a whole. Thus we





cannot determine the expected effects of a passage from Luke's Gospel by considering the passage as an isolated pericope but only by considering the role that the passage plays in the narrative as a whole. And we can assume that readers desire consistency and make connections necessary to resolve apparent tensions within a text in favor of the most consistent interpretation.[6]

A normative process of reading also assumes that readers know certain things. To determine the effects that Luke's Gospel is expected to have on its readers we must assume that these readers know what a Samaritan is, what a centurion does, how much a denarius is worth, and so on. On the other hand, determination of the expected effects of a work is often contingent on assuming that the readers do not know certain things. Readers of Mark's Gospel, for instance, are not expected to have read the Gospel of Luke and, therefore, the implied reader of Mark's Gospel does not think of Jesus as one who has been born of a virgin.

Normative reading involves an implicit contract by which the reader agrees to accept the dynamics of the story world that are established by the implied author. If a story features talking animals, we are expected to suspend our disbelief and to accept that, in this story, that is the way things are. In the story world of Luke's Gospel, God speaks audibly from heaven, fantastic miracles are commonplace, and human beings interact freely with spiritual creatures like angels and demons. Narrative criticism opposes any attempt to "demythologize" such elements by determining what actual historical occurrences might have inspired the tales. Rather, the expected effects of the story can only be determined if we adopt the perspective of readers who accept these and other elements of the story as real, at least as "real" within the world of the story.

In the same vein, narrative criticism interprets stories from the perspective of implied readers who may be assumed to accept the value system that undergirds the stories they read. Many readers today would be offended by stories that present cowboys as good and Indians as bad, yet we recognize that this response is shaped by perceptions that the implied readers of such stories are not expected to share. We are free to critique or reject stories that evince values and beliefs contrary to our own, but if we wish to understand these stories we must at least pretend to adopt these values in order to determine the effects they are expected to produce on readers who

6. Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1974).

are assumed to think this way. Assumptions undergirding the NT Gospels include the beliefs that God's point of view defines truth and that the Hebrew Scriptures can be a reliable guide for determining this divine perspective. Since narrative criticism demands that texts be interpreted from the faith perspective that their readers are assumed to hold, narrative critics may be required to focus their imagination in the opposite direction of that required for historical critics. Whereas historical critics are expected to suspend faith commitments temporarily in order to interpret texts from the perspective of objective, disinterested historians, narrative critics may be expected to adopt faith commitments temporarily in order to determine how texts are expected to affect their implied readers.

## 2. Narrative Analysis

In practice narrative criticism is a complex process that calls for attention to numerous literary dynamics. We will list a few of the most significant matters and then observe how consideration of some of these may affect interpretation of a typical biblical passage.

### *2.1 Ordering of Events*

The order in which a narrative relates events is important because readers are expected to consider each new episode in light of what has gone before. Sometimes narratives report events "out of order" by presenting flashbacks concerning what happened earlier (Mark 6:17-29) or by including predictions or allusions that foreshadow what is still to come (Luke 2:34-35).

### *2.2 Duration and Frequency of Events*

Readers' perceptions concerning the events of a narrative may be influenced by the amount of space given to reporting individual episodes or by the number of times that a particular event is referenced in the narrative. A narrative may pass quickly over events that transpire over several years (Luke 2:52) and then relate in some detail matters that take only a few minutes or hours (Luke 23:26-49). Similarly, a narrative may tell us with a single reference that something happens repeatedly (Luke 22:39) or make several references to something that happens only once (Luke 9:22, 44; 18:31-34; 24:7).





### *2.3 Causal Links*

In making sense of a narrative readers are especially attentive to links that are established between the events that are related. Typical links include explicit or implicit indications that one event causes another to happen or at least makes the occurrence of the subsequent event possible or likely. In some literature (including NT narratives), such causal links may be teleological in that present events are influenced not only by what has happened in the past but also by what must happen in the future (Luke 24:26).

### *2.4 Conflict*

Practically all narratives contain elements of conflict that drive the plot and involve the readers in adjudication of opposing tendencies. The manner in which these conflicts are developed and resolved has a significant effect on the readers' experience of the story. To cite but one example, conflict that is left unresolved tends to impinge directly on the readers so that they are left to decide what they would do if the matter were left to them. Thus readers of Luke 15:25-32 are not told how an elder son responds to his father's words concerning welcome of the prodigal younger brother but are expected to ask themselves, "What would I do if I were he?"

### *2.5 Characters*

The manner in which characters are presented in a narrative is especially significant for determining the effect that the narrative is expected to have on its readers. Characters may be flat and predictable like the Pharisees in most of our Gospel stories, or they may exhibit a wide variety of traits, such as Jesus' disciples, who are presented as enlightened in one instance (Luke 8:10) and yet as lacking insight in another (Luke 9:44-45). Characters may remain much the same throughout the narrative, or they may develop and change in response to what transpires as the story progresses.

### *2.6 Characterization*

Narrative critics are interested not only in what we know about the characters in a story but also in how we know this. Readers' perceptions concerning characters may be shaped by comments from the narrator (Luke 1:6), by reports of the characters' own words, deeds, or perceptions (Luke

1:8-12), or by reports of the words, deeds, or perceptions of others (Luke 1:22).

### *2.7 Empathy*

The effects that a narrative has on its readers are often determined by the empathy that these readers feel with particular characters in the narrative. Empathy may be realistic in that readers believe they really are like these characters, or idealistic in that the characters have qualities or experiences the readers wish to emulate. The actual empathy of real readers with characters is impossible to predict, but literary cues sometimes indicate the characters with which readers are expected to empathize. For example, when Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37), the explicit identification of his audience as a legal expert (10:25) encourages readers to hear the story from this perspective and to identify with the characters in the story that this person would most likely empathize with (the priest and the Levite, who like the legal expert are religious leaders).

### *2.8 Point of View*

Narratives typically present diverse perspectives concerning what is transpiring in the story, and readers are expected to regard some of these as more reliable than others. In NT narratives, God's point of view is normative for truth and the perspective of the narrators is always reliable.[7] When God declares that Jesus is the "Beloved Son" (Luke 3:21) or when the narrator of Luke's Gospel says that Jesus is "full of the Holy Spirit" (Luke 4:1), the readers are not expected to wonder whether these things are really so. Similarly, the perspectives of angels, prophets, and Jesus himself are all shown to be reliable in the Gospel of Luke because they always concur with the point of view evinced by God and by the narrator. But when the crowds proclaim that Jesus is a prophet (Luke 7:16) readers may be expected to regard this point of view with some ambiguity since the crowds also think that Jesus is John the Baptist risen from the dead, a point of view that is clearly wrong (Luke 9:7, 19).

7. On reliable narrators in literature, see Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, 3-4, 70-76; Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 147-49.





### *2.9 Settings*

The spatial, temporal, and social locations of events may be significant for how readers construe what is reported in a narrative. Readers may respond differently to the story if an event occurs on a mountain (Luke 9:28-36) or in a boat (Luke 5:3-11), on a sabbath (Luke 6:1-5) or in the evening (Luke 4:40), in private (Luke 6:12), or among a crowd (Luke 6:17-18).

### *2.10 Symbolism*

Narratives often employ figures of speech and other symbolic language that readers are expected to understand in a way that transcends the most literal application (Luke 17:37). Thus, "bearing the cross" may signify the life of self-denial that is to be a mark of all those who follow Jesus, not just those who suffer literal martyrdom through crucifixion (Luke 9:23). Settings may also be imbued with symbolic meaning, such that a wedding may signify joy or festivity (Luke 5:34) and winter may become a symbol for the ardors of apocalyptic travail (Mark 13:18; Luke 21:29-31).

### *2.11 Irony*

Narratives are said to be ironic when they contain literary cues that indicate readers are expected to interpret the story in ways that run contrary to what might initially appear to be the obvious interpretation. For example, an ironic parable in Luke's Gospel presents a Pharisee who thanks God he is not like a certain tax collector without realizing that it is the tax collector whom God considers justified (18:9-14).

### *2.12 Intertextuality*

Sometimes narratives assume that readers are already familiar with other texts and so borrow freely from motifs that these texts employ. The readers of Luke's Gospel are assumed to be familiar with the writings of the OT and may be expected to recognize allusions to those writings even when explicit citations are not made. Thus, Luke's implied readers may be expected to understand Jesus' raising of a widow's son in 7:11-17 as a miracle reminiscent of miracles performed by Elijah and Elisha in 1 Kgs 17:17-24 and 2 Kgs 4:32-37.

### *2.13 Structural Patterns*

Readers' responses to a narrative may also be affected by the patterns of discourse through which the story is told.[8] Such patterns may be poetic, employing repetition, meter, rhyme, or alliteration. They may also take the form of a logical ordering of content based on a scheme of generalization, particularization, or the like. In Luke's Gospel, for instance, four sayings that begin with the word "Blessed" (6:20-22) are contrasted with four sayings that began with the word "Woe" (6:24-26).

## 3. A Sample Text: Luke 3:1-20

### *3.1 Some Literary Features*

The portion of Luke's narrative that modern Bibles designate as "chapter 3" begins with the story of John the Baptist's ministry to Israel. A number of this story's literary features are significant.

With regard to *ordering of events*, the story concludes, not as we would expect, with John's baptism of Jesus, but with John being imprisoned by Herod (3:19-20). Although Jesus' baptism must have occurred before John was arrested, we are not told about it until later (3:21). One effect of relating the events in this order is to create a definite break for readers between the stories of John and Jesus. The story of Jesus' ministry does not begin until that of John's is essentially complete. Thus, we are encouraged to view the work of these two as complementary rather than competitive.

With regard to *settings*, the temporal setting for John's ministry is defined with great precision (3:1-2), while the spatial setting is given simply as "all the region around the Jordan" (3:3). The designation of the temporal setting, furthermore, includes references to many geographical areas, telling us who the rulers of Rome, Judea, Galilee, Iturea and Trachonitis, and Abilene were. Luke's readers are expected to realize that what is reported here is of monumental significance for history — and not only for the history of those who live in the region around the Jordan but for the history of the whole world (cf. 3:6).

*Symbolism* is evident in the words from Isaiah that the narrator cites

8. For description of several such patterns see David R. Bauer, *The Structure of Matthew's Gospel: A Study in Literary Design*, JSNTSS 31 (Sheffield: Almond, 1988).





as descriptive of John's work (3:4-6). Luke's readers do not imagine that John is literally advocating the razing of hills or the filling of valleys but recognize that these images symbolize what he means by repentance: a reordering of human lives as preparation for receiving God's salvation (3:6). But symbols are by nature ambiguous and invite the readers' consideration of more than one possible application. Elsewhere in Luke, language of raising and lowering is used of social upheaval (1:52), community hospitality (14:11), and the justification of individuals before God (18:14). Along these lines, Luke's implied readers are probably expected to translate these symbols anew into contexts appropriate for their own worlds outside the story. Thus, Luke's readers are invited to consider what, for them, constitute the valleys, mountains, crooked places, or rough ways that need to be transformed.

An element of *irony* is introduced when John, whose role is to prepare Israel to receive its Messiah (cf. Acts 19:4), is actually mistaken for the Messiah himself (3:15). This irony is doubled later in the narrative when the Messiah really does come and is mistakenly identified as John the Baptist (Luke 9:7, 19).

*Intertextuality* is obviously a prominent feature of this story since the book of Isaiah is explicitly quoted in a way that assumes that the story's readers will not only be familiar with these words but will accept them as reliable and authoritative (3:4-6; cf. Isa 40:3-5). Less obvious intertextual allusions may also be found. The expression "the word of God came to John" in 3:2 recalls similar statements scattered throughout the OT (Jer 1:2; Hos 1:1; Joel 1:1; Jonah 1:1; Mic 1:1; Zeph 1:1; Hag 1:1; Zech 1:1). Luke's readers are expected to be familiar with this language and to realize that it marks John as a prophet (cf. Luke 1:76; 7:26). And the reference to the "region around the Jordan" (3:3) is expected to bring to mind OT imagery of the Jordan River as the entrance to the promised land (Joshua 3). Thus, the spatial setting for this story is invested with subtle symbolism through an intertextual connection: John's baptism of repentance allows people to enter into the realm of God's promise and prepares them to receive something greater than what he himself is able to offer (3:16).

These literary observations regarding Luke 3:1-20 may be interesting, each in its own right, but ultimately a narrative-critical analysis would hope to produce a sustained reading of the text that articulates its overall impact. To do this with this particular passage, attention to two matters seems imperative.

### 3.2 *The Relationship of the Story to the Narrative as a Whole*

Luke's readers do not encounter John the Baptist for the first time in this story. They have already formed impressions and expectations concerning him from material presented earlier in the accounts of his birth (1:5-25, 57-80). Many of those expectations are now fulfilled. Readers heard previously that John would be a prophet (1:76), and the presentation of him now as one to whom the word of the Lord comes confirms this (3:2). Readers heard that he would prepare the Lord's way (1:76), and now the narrator cites Isaiah's words to indicate that this is precisely what he is doing (3:4). Readers heard he would give people "knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins" (1:77), and, sure enough, John is now preparing people for the salvation of God (3:6) by offering a baptism of repentance "for the forgiveness of sins" (3:3).

Numerous connections can also be seen between what is presented here and what is to come later in this narrative. John warns people against substituting an appeal to Abraham for repentance (3:8), and later we will hear a rich man do exactly that (16:24, 27, 30). John introduces the image of fruitless trees being cut down (3:9), which will be used again in the parables of Jesus (13:6-9). John commends the sharing of possessions (3:11), a characteristic that will later mark the Jerusalem Christians in the book of Acts (2:44-45). John tells tax collectors to collect only what is due them (3:12-13), and later we will encounter a tax collector who offers to repay any whom he has defrauded (19:8).

In addition to these specific links, John the Baptist is presented in this passage as making promises or predictions regarding events that are still to come. John speaks of a more powerful one who is coming (3:16), a prediction that in some sense is fulfilled almost immediately when Jesus is baptized and begins his ministry. But John specifically promises that this one will baptize people with the Holy Spirit, and this part of the promise is not fulfilled until the second volume of the narrative (Acts 2:4). Finally, John also speaks of the coming one as a judge who will separate the wheat from the chaff (3:17), an image that Luke's reader will associate with the role Jesus is to exercise at the end of time (Acts 10:42). John's words thus offer a foreshadowing of what is to come in this story, in its sequel, and in still another story yet to be told.[9]

9. Narrative critics debate whether Luke and Acts should be read as one continuous story or as two related stories by the same author. See Mikeal C. Parsons and Richard I. Pervo, *Rethinking the Unity of Luke and Acts* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).





The reader, then, is expected to regard Luke 3:1-20 as providing major impetus to the overall plot of the narrative. What happens here sets in motion the events with which the remainder of the two-volume work will be concerned, the events that "turn the world upside down" (Acts 17:6). Evidence that this is the case may be adduced from such passages as Acts 1:22 and 10:37, where the ministry of John the Baptist is used to date the beginning of what comes to be accomplished through Jesus and his followers.

The plot of Luke's two-volume work is largely concerned with God's plan to bring salvation to all people.[10] Perhaps the greatest impediment to this plan in Luke's story is the false confidence or self-righteousness of religious leaders who do not think they need the salvation that God offers and who do not wish to see that salvation offered to others (5:30-32; 7:29-30; 18:9). Already in this passage, we find the theme of the two-volume work articulated clearly, namely "that all flesh might see the salvation of God" (3:6). But also already the potential for conflict is raised by John's curious warning, "Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'" (3:8). In the immediate context, this warning makes little sense, since no one is saying this. But as Luke's story continues readers will realize that John identified from the very beginning what would prove to be a central conflict throughout the narrative.

### 3.3 *Character Identification*

Luke's readers are presented with a full range of characters in 3:1-20. At one extreme is John the Baptist, to whom the word of God comes (3:3), and at the other is Herod, to whom the narrator attributes "evil deeds" (3:19). Readers are obviously expected to regard John as the protagonist (the hero) and Herod as the antagonist (the villain) in this part of the tale. But what of the crowds, the characters who seem to occupy a neutral ground somewhere between these two extremes? On the one hand, the crowds come to John for baptism (3:7) and seem genuinely concerned with learning what they ought to do (3:10). On the other hand, they are the recipients of harsh words spoken by John (3:7-9), and they seem to miss the point when they wonder whether he is the Messiah (3:15).

10. Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Fortress, 1986, 1990).

The crowds embody potential for either positive or negative development and so are the characters in this episode with whom readers will empathize most realistically. Such empathy is not complete. The fact that Luke's readers know things that these crowds do not — such as that Jesus is the Messiah (2:11) — places the readers in a privileged position that allows them to distance themselves from the crowds. Still, Luke's readers are expected to hear John's words from the crowds' point of view and to ask along with them "What then should we do?" The offering of three sample answers to this question (3:11, 13, 14) entices readers to consider other possible replies. If this is what John said to people with surplus goods, to tax collectors, and to soldiers, what might he have said to us? How should we prepare the way of the Lord? What "fruits worthy of repentance" are expected of us? Sometimes, narrative criticism can detect "gaps" in a narrative that readers are expected to notice and to attempt to fill, though narrative criticism may not be able to predict the manner in which readers will actually fill these gaps.[11] So in this case narrative criticism is able to detect the questions that Luke's implied readers are expected to ask themselves, though it cannot predict the answers that real readers will actually supply when they ask themselves these things.

John the Baptist is also presented as a character who invites reader identification in this episode. He serves as a model character for what is known as "idealistic empathy." Readers may not feel that they are very much like John the Baptist, but the assumption underlying the narrative is that they would like to be. Notably, Luke's Gospel lacks any mention of John wearing camel's hair or eating locusts and wild honey (Mark 1:6), details that might make him appear strange and might distance him from Luke's readers. Rather, in this story, he appears as a prototype of a typical Christian evangelist.[12] He preaches the gospel (3:18) and offers people salvation through the forgiveness of sins (3:3, 6). Indeed, later Christian missionaries will appear to be copying John when they set about proclaiming "repentance and forgiveness of sins" (24:47) and when they urge people to "repent and be baptized" (Acts 2:38) or to "do works worthy of repentance" (Acts 26:20; cf. Luke 3:8). Like John, they will be called on to shun glory wrongly attributed to them (Acts 10:25-26; 14:11-18). Like John, they will have to be bold in confronting evil rulers, to bring testimony before kings and

11. On "gaps," see Iser, *Act of Reading.*

12. Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1982) 27.





governors (21:12). John's work is described in the literal Greek of Luke 7:27 as being to "go as a messenger before the Lord's face" and these same words are used to describe the work of Jesus' disciples in Luke 9:52 and 10:1. Though Luke's readers may know that historically John the Baptist was not a Christian, the story of Luke's Gospel presents him in a way that allows him to function as a hero for Christian readers. He is an inspiring figure whom Christians will wish to emulate.

## 4. What Narrative Criticism Does and Does Not Do

Narrative criticism is best understood as one key among several that are available to biblical interpreters. Used properly, it is able to open some doors and grant access to certain kinds of insight that may not be otherwise attainable. But it will not open all the doors or answer all the questions that people ask about the Bible and about the meaning of biblical material.

Objections to narrative criticism usually focus on what the method is not able to do. Historical critics sometimes complain that it treats texts as mere stories rather than as records of significant moments in history. Reader-oriented literary critics may find the notion of an implied reader too limiting and accuse narrative critics of ignoring the vast panoply of potential responses that real readers actually bring to texts. Such criticisms are based on accurate observations regarding what narrative criticism does and does not attempt to do, but they miss the point if they assume that commitment to narrative criticism precludes one from also studying texts in other ways.

Ideological objections are sometimes leveled against narrative criticism on the grounds that adoption of the implied reader's perspective prevents dialogue with what is objectionable in texts. Thus, if the implied readers of a Gospel are expected to have a patriarchal or anti-Semitic point of view, the narrative critic will be forced to interpret the text from that perspective. But narrative critics are under no compulsion to accept personally the interpretations that their method leads them to articulate. Narrative criticism merely identifies how we as readers are expected to be affected by the text if we read it from the point of view that the text assumes that we possess. Whether we as real readers embrace, ignore, or resist the response expected of the implied reader is a matter of individual choice. Ironically, the proponents of "resistant reading" who make this charge against narrative criticism usually practice narrative criticism themselves, though unwittingly, in order to determine what it is that they want to resist.

Other objections to narrative criticism focus on the manner in which the method is actually practiced. For instance, narrative critics may be charged with anachronistically applying modern concepts to ancient literature or with treating the Gospels as though they were novels or works of fiction. Such criticisms may be valid. Narrative criticism is a relatively new discipline, and its procedures are still being tested in the crucibles of scholarship. Narrative critics themselves have found that some approaches work better than others and they are continually revising their work in light of new insights that arise.

For those who have embraced narrative criticism, a primary attraction has been the opportunity to study biblical stories on their own terms — as stories, rather than simply as sources for historical or theological reflection. For most Christians, the indispensable source of life and vitality of faith is neither a tentative historical reconstruction nor a set of scripturally derived doctrinal principles. That source is, rather, the stories of the Bible themselves, remembered, treasured, and interpreted in their narrative form.[13] By respecting the literary character of these stories, narrative criticism is able to attend to what many people think should be one dimension of the total theological task of scriptural exegesis.

## 5. Suggestions for Further Reading

The development of narrative criticism is one aspect of a larger movement involving application of modern literary theory to biblical studies. For a brief survey of this movement and an extensive bibliography of the literature it has produced see *The Bible and Modern Literary Criticism: A Critical Assessment and Annotated Bibliography,* by Mark Allan Powell with the assistance of Cecile G. Gray and Melissa C. Curtis (Westport: Greenwood, 1992).

For a historical overview of the development of narrative criticism by one who ultimately finds it shortsighted see Stephen D. Moore, *Literary Criticism and the Gospels: The Theoretical Challenge* (New Haven: Yale University, 1989). For a detailed description of the principles and procedures of narrative criticism as it is currently practiced in NT studies, see Mark Allan Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?* GBS (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

13. Alan Culpepper, "Story and History in the Gospels," *RevExp* 81 (1984) 467-77, esp. 474.





Some of the most accessible works that use narrative criticism in studies of particular NT books are:

On Matthew: David R. Bauer, *The Structure of Matthew's Gospel: A Study in Literary Design,* JSNTSS 31 (Sheffield: Almond, 1988); John Paul Heil, *The Death and Resurrection of Jesus: A Narrative-Critical Reading of Matthew 26-28* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991); David B. Howell, *Matthew's Inclusive Story: A Study in the Narrative Rhetoric of the First Gospel,* JSNTSS 42 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1990); Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story* (2d ed., Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988); Dorothy Jean Weaver, *Matthew's Missionary Discourse: A Literary-Critical Analysis,* JSNTSS 38 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1990).

On Mark: Jerry Camery-Hoggatt, *Irony in Mark's Gospel: Text and Subtext,* SNTSMS 72 (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1992); Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Conflict in Mark: Jesus, Authorities, Disciples* (Fortress, 1989); Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, *Narrative Space and Mythic Meaning in Mark* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986); David Rhoads and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982).

On Luke and Acts: John A. Darr, *On Character Building: The Reader and the Rhetoric of Characterization in Luke-Acts,* LCBI (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992); Robert J. Karris, *Luke, Artist and Theologian: Luke's Passion Account as Literature* (New York: Paulist, 1985); Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Conflict in Luke: Jesus, Authorities, Disciples* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991); William S. Kurz, *Reading Luke-Acts: Dynamics of Biblical Narrative* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993); Steven M. Sheeley, *Narrative Asides in Luke-Acts,* JSNTSS 72 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1992); Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation,* 2 vols. (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Fortress, 1986, 1990).

On John: R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); Paul Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985); Gail R. O'Day, *Revelation in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Mode and Theological Claim* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986); Jeffrey L. Staley, *The Print's First Kiss: A Rhetorical Investigation of the Implied Reader in the Fourth Gospel,* SBLDS 82 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988); Mark W. G. Stibbe, *John as Storyteller: Narrative Criticism and the Fourth Gospel,* SNTSMS 73 (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1992).