

WTJ 67 (2005): 229-45

EXAMINING THE NARRATIVES  
OF OLD TESTAMENT NARRATIVE:  
AN EXPLORATION IN BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

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For many years now experts have been discussing ways that narrative approaches to theology may help postmodern readers understand the Bible in fresh ways.<sup>1</sup> In the fields of Old Testament Theology and Biblical Theology (which I define as treatments of the whole of scripture instead of one testament or the other) several recent volumes utilize techniques associated with narrative studies to make theological statements. For example, Stephen Dempster and John Goldingay use literary criticism such as that advocated by Robert Alter and others in their treatments of the wholeness of the Old Testament.<sup>2</sup> Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen do the same in their analysis of the whole “Biblical Story,” as do C. Marvin Pate, J. Scott Duvall, and the other authors of *The Story of Israel: A Biblical Theology*.<sup>3</sup> Though some scholars may sever historical and literary concerns, V. Phillips Long has argued correctly that some of the types of criticism employed by literary critics can be applied to Old Testament narratives and to other historically accurate texts without impugning those texts’ accuracy or authority.<sup>4</sup> Long’s work is very important at this point, since evangelicals should be wary of methods that do not take biblical inspiration into account. Carl Henry was right to make this point in his 1985 dialogue with Hans Frei.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Gabriel Fackre, “Narrative Theology: An Overview,” *Int* 37 (October 1983): 340-52 and the other articles in that issue. See also George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984); and Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (New Studies in Biblical Theology; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003); and John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology: Vol. 1, Israel’s Gospel* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004); and C. Marvin Pate et al., *The Story of Israel: A Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> V. Phillips Long, *The Art of Biblical History* (Foundations for Contemporary Interpretation 5; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994); and “Historiography of the Old Testament,” in *The Face of Old Testament Studies: A Survey of Contemporary Approaches* (ed. David W. Baker and Bill T. Arnold; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 145-75.

<sup>5</sup> Carl F. H. Henry, *Gods of This Age or . . . God of the Ages* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1994), 257-76.

Long's assertion has support in other disciplines. Indeed, no less prominent historian than George Marsden states in his 2003 biography of Jonathan Edwards that historians need to tell their subject's story in an interesting way:

The first goal of a biographer, it seems to me, should be to tell a good story that illuminates not only the subject, but also the landscapes surrounding that person and the horizons of the readers. Unlike specialized studies that analyze every intellectual issue and historical debate, much of the illumination should come simply from the telling of a *story*. That story should reveal a real person whose successes were achieved in the midst of anxieties, weaknesses, and failings. The tensions of a life are often what cast most light, not only on the person but also on the culture and the wider human experience.<sup>6</sup>

It seems, then, that there may be a growing interest across disciplinary lines in utilizing literary analysis of narrative in a way that links traditional literary, historical, and theological aims. For the most part, I find these trends promising.

I have described my own methodological foundational principles and convictions in other places, so I will not repeat them in detail here.<sup>7</sup> Rather, I will simply state that I am a traditional evangelical in my historical conclusions and in my beliefs about the inspiration and authority of scripture. Also, I believe in the unity of the Bible, adhere to a canonical approach, try to utilize a literary approach best represented by the work of Cleanth Brooks,<sup>8</sup> and strive to mesh exegesis and theological reflection. I believe in narrative theology in the sense that I am convinced that narrative analysis yields theological data that involves readers in the biblical story in a unique and telling way. To be more specific, how the Bible itself depicts God, Israel, and other primary characters through statements, settings, and events can lead interpreters to legitimate and accurate theological comments that come from the text itself.

I make this statement about "the Bible itself" because many scholars believe that the most basic of all principles in Biblical Theology is the notion that categories for theological reflection ought to come from the Bible itself, not from external sources. Though it is questionable as to whether interpreters can ever completely achieve this goal, the effort is worthy if the Bible is to be heard on its own terms and if Biblical Theology is to be the sort of helpful "bridge discipline" C. R. Scobie and others hope it will be.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> George Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 10.

<sup>7</sup> For my approach to Old Testament Theology as a subset of Biblical Theology see *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 11-57; for my approach to Biblical Theology see "Biblical Theology and the Wholeness of Scripture: Steps Toward a Program for the Future," in *Biblical Theology: Retrospect and Prospect* (ed. Scott J. Hafemann; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 267-79; and for my approach to literary criticism see "Literary Criticism, Old Testament Literary Criticism, and the Wholeness of Scripture," in *The Task of Theology for the Church in the 21st Century* (ed. H. K. Kim; Proceedings of the Fourth PCTS International Symposium; Seoul: PCTS Press, 2004), 2-28.

<sup>8</sup> See esp. his integration of history, text, and reader in *Historical Evidence and the Reading of Seventeenth-Century Poetry* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1991) and in *Community, Religion, and Literature* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995). The often-repeated comment that all New Critics rejected historical analysis is simply not accurate.

<sup>9</sup> See C. R. Scobie, *The Ways of Our God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003).

How can we start to use biblical categories to glean “narrative theology”? One place to begin is with the historical summaries found throughout the Old Testament. After all, scholars as diverse in viewpoint as Gerhard von Rad and Graeme Goldsworthy have argued that within the Bible itself there reside crucial specific summaries of the story of Israel and the human race to that point in the canon.<sup>10</sup> These summaries include many of the same elements, yet also emphasize points germane to each new resting point in the narrative. These summaries involve readers and hearers in the greater story. They emphasize the nature of Yahweh and his work, and they give evidence at times of knowing earlier texts. They appear in every significant segment of the canon, occur at crucial junctures of Israel’s history, and span the genres of scripture. They testify to the unity of scripture within the normal and reasonable boundaries of literary and historical diversity.

Thus, it is not an imposition on the text to make theological statements from such biblical texts. It is, rather, an appropriate way of taking the canon seriously on its own terms and offering the results of such analysis to other theologians using different methods or pursuing different goals for their enrichment and response. Hopefully, this approach also leaves adherents of Biblical Theology open to receiving helpful comments offered by others.

These summary texts provide a window into how biblical writers and canonical compilers viewed the biblical story. They also provide a mirror for current readers. Though one can easily add and take away from the list, longer examples of such passages include: Deut 1–4; Josh 23–24; Judg 1–2; 1 Sam 12; 2 Kgs 17; Jer 2–6; Ezek 16, 20, and 23; Pss 78–106, especially 104–106; Dan 9; Neh 9; and Acts 7 and 13. In this list, one finds common characters and events. One also observes a variety of literary types and historical settings. Shorter summaries also appear relatively often in the scriptures as well.<sup>11</sup> In this article, I will analyze briefly Deut 1–4, treating it as a paradigm passage, then make comments on other passages as space permits. My goal is to stimulate myself and others to think about the narratives that exist within the grand narrative of the Bible, a narrative that begins with creation and ends with new creation.<sup>12</sup> I hope to think about the theology these narratives provide and how they relate to readers now. I am not trying to provide the final and definitive word on this subject, even if I thought myself sufficient for this task.

My argument is threefold. First, these summary texts indicate that the writers of biblical narrative had a scriptural consciousness. They reflected on texts. Second, these writers utilized the same overarching biblical story populated by

<sup>10</sup> See Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology, Vol. 1* (trans. D. M. G. Stalker; 1962; repr., Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 115–21; Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 197.

<sup>11</sup> I have in mind texts like Jer 32:20–25 and Matt 23:29–36 that use part of the larger narrative to make their points.

<sup>12</sup> For an excellent treatment of this scheme consult William J. Dumbrell, *The Search for Order: Biblical Eschatology in Focus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994); and *Covenant and Creation: A Theology of Old Testament Covenants* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984).

the same characters, settings, and themes to make specific theological statements. Third, these writers placed themselves and their audiences (either oral or optical) into that story to change or affirm their behavior, and they intend for subsequent readers to do the same.

### I. *Deuteronomy 1–4 and the Pre-Conquest Story of Israel*

Moses' oration to Israel in this passage is the Old Testament's first full-scale summary of Israel's story. Certainly the genealogies that appear earlier in the Torah summarize history to that point in many ways. Jacob's blessing of his sons in Gen 49 includes much of their family's story to that time. The travel summary in Num 33 has a similar purpose for Israel's wilderness period. Perhaps more significantly for Deut 1–4, Lev 26 includes a narrative threat of what will happen if Israel does not adhere to its exclusive relationship with Yahweh and the demands of that relationship.<sup>13</sup> Yet Moses' recounting in Deut 1–4 of what has occurred to that point in the story includes more breadth of time covered, more character development, and more theological commentary than anything the Torah has included to this point.

Moses' summary unfolds in at least three basic movements. The first movement of the account includes the noting of Israel's leaving Sinai (1:6), Israel's journey to the edge of the Promised Land and refusal to invade it (1:19–33), and the penalties for that refusal (1:34–46). The second movement of the account stresses victories in the desert (2:1–3:22), Yahweh's barring of Moses from the Promised Land (3:23–29), and the nation's general readiness for invasion. In effect, the conquest begins before the people ever cross the Jordan River. The third movement of the account is more overtly interpretive. It stresses faithfulness to the covenant (4:1–14), particularly in the matter of idolatry (4:15–31), since Yahweh is the only God (4:35, 39), and since Yahweh is the one who has brought Israel out of Egypt in order to give them the Promised Land (4:32–40).

This longer summary has a summary of its own in 4:31–40. Here Moses mentions Yahweh's oath to the patriarchs (4:31), creation (4:32), the covenant at Sinai (4:33), the trials in and deliverance from Egypt (4:34), and the victories they have already experienced as a down payment on later victories in Canaan (4:37–38). He makes these narrative points in order to remind them of the privilege of the revelation of monotheism (4:35, 39). He does so to emphasize Yahweh's love for their ancestors and for them (4:37). He does so to reassure them of Yahweh's great power and presence with them so that they can have confidence in their future (4:37–38). Perhaps most importantly, he does so to call them to obedience, which is the response that will guarantee their wellbeing in the future.

Moses warns them that they will face what Lev 26 threatens if they turn from Yahweh to idols (4:25–28). In short, they will lose the land; yet, he also claims that Yahweh will restore them if they turn to him (4:29–31). After all, he is a

<sup>13</sup> Rolf Rendtorff, *The Canonical Hebrew Bible: A Theology of the Old Testament* (trans. David E. Orton; Tools for Biblical Studies 7; Leiden: Deo, 2005), 76.

merciful God (4:31), a point made plain in the paradigmatic passage of Exod 34:6-7.

Several elements of this summary are significant for the summaries that follow. First, Israel's story to this point in the Bible frames the text's theology. Moses tells a story that includes key events such as creation, languishing in Egypt, deliverance, a revelation of covenant at Sinai, disobedience, rebounding from disobedience, victory in the desert, and the installation of Joshua as the new leader. It includes warnings about what the future may hold. In short, Moses is already telling a *biblical story*. As John Sailhamer explains:

It should be pointed out here that when Moses reflects on the past, he does so, with few exceptions . . . , on the basis of the account of the past already written in the preceding narratives. Moses' view of the past is a "scriptural view." He does not recount events which were not recorded earlier. In other words, he does not assume knowledge of Israel's history that is independent of the biblical account itself. His focus is on those events already present in the mind of the readers of the Pentateuch.<sup>14</sup>

Second, key characters have been highlighted. How these characters act, how Moses portrays the characters, and the factors that constitute the current setting all contribute to the specific theological statements Moses makes. Yahweh proves to be the only God through revelatory acts, and proves his power and the nature of his presence through what he did to Egypt, how he led Israel in the desert, and how he gave Israel military victories.

Moses' actions and comments portray the venerable chief of Israel as an indomitable, aggravated, yet loving leader. He is a "complex character" in the truest sense of the term. All at the same time, he is a master speaker, intrepid leader, and volatile follower of Yahweh. He may also fail to take full responsibility for his own failures. Subsequent texts envision him in these ways and as lawgiver (see Josh 1:1-9) as well as a special mediator with Yahweh (see Jer 15:1-2; Ps 98:6).

Israel is likewise complex. Since the people appear as a sort of conglomerate character their behavior may well change from scene to scene. Brave and obedient Israel leaving Egypt turns into cowardly Israel in Kadesh Barnea, only to return to brave and obedient Israel in the wars against Og. There is no one single way to characterize the people here or elsewhere in the Bible. Each context must decide the issue.

The same can be said for the nations related to Abraham as well. Yahweh gives some of them their own land, so they are blessed peoples. Indeed, as Thomas Mann claims, "There are now in effect *four* promised lands, each of which is to remain inviolate, a fulfillment of the promise made to Abram that, in conjunction with the blessing pronounced upon him, at least these peoples also will receive blessing."<sup>15</sup> Yet in this summary they are also obstacles to Israel's practice of their faith. They appear in these and other ways later in the Bible.

<sup>14</sup> John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 424. See also Rendtorff, *Canonical Hebrew Bible*, 74.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas W. Mann, *The Book of the Torah: The Narrative Integrity of the Pentateuch* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 149.

Third, the settings in this account become significant in later summaries. The desert becomes both a place of faithfulness and a place of rebellion depending on the needs of the later writer. Both uses could be accurate, since both actually happened. The desert was the place where Israel followed the Lord after the exodus, a place of rebellion, and the place where the new generation was prepared to enter the Promised Land.<sup>16</sup> Forty years of actions provide a lot of ammunition for stories and the application of stories. The time in Egypt is likewise portrayed in more than one way. It is described as a place where Israel worshiped idols (see Josh 24:14), and also as a place where faithful Israel cried out to Yahweh and was heard (also see Josh 24:14). Again, both are contextually true depending on what point in the story the speaker or writer wishes to emphasize.

Fourth, the exhortations to the audience in the summary provide an explanation for why certain items of Israel's story may or may not appear. It is not enough to think that Moses recounts them because they happened. They did happen, but Moses recounts them to incite the hearers to faith in Yahweh, covenantal fidelity, and long life in the land. In fact, he demands a response. His hearers cannot remain neutral. As Mann rightly states, "Acceptance or rejection will finally determine whether one receives blessing or curse, hence the gravity of the response that is demanded. The significance of the narration in Deuteronomy is eviscerated if this demand for responsibility is ignored."<sup>17</sup> Later writers will do the same with their narratives. This fact helps explain why certain parts of Israel's story are repeated routinely in summaries and why others are not. The audience's situation helps to determine the elements that are reused. Thus, the text encourages interpreters to remember that these words are penned to affect the lives of those that first heard or read the words and to affect the lives of those that hear and read them now.

It is also significant to note that Moses enfolds the audience into what has happened in Israel's story. The original hearers were not at Sinai any more than twenty-first-century readers were. Nonetheless, Moses states that "you" saw certain things. He claims that "you" did certain things. He clearly intends for the audience to put themselves into the story's past so that they can join the story in the present and make the story end the way it is supposed to end in the future. Sailhamer asserts:

It is important to note this focus because it shows that his audience is not merely those Israelites whom Moses was addressing at a particular time on the plains of Moab. His audience is anyone who has read the earlier portions of the Pentateuch! In this way one can see that Moses' audience, and hence the audience of the Pentateuch, is always the contemporary reader. He is not addressing only those in the past. He speaks directly to the contemporary reader as well.<sup>18</sup>

Fifth, the warnings provide a futuristic side to the narrative. Israel will continue to have a story. That story will have continuity with what has taken place

<sup>16</sup> Goldsworthy, *According to Plan*, 192-98.

<sup>17</sup> Mann, *Book of the Torah*, 147.

<sup>18</sup> Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 424-25. See also Rendtorff, *Canonical Hebrew Bible*, 84.

in the past. Israel is also in the process of writing its own story as it pays attention to Moses' warnings about the future. John Goldingay writes, "The narrative invites its community to own the fact that the story has never (yet) come to an end, and it inexorably insists that its community lives within the story."<sup>19</sup> The loss of land is not guaranteed at this point. This threat is only something that may be, not something that must be, to paraphrase a question Ebenezer Scrooge asks in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. At the very least the story implies what we call eschatology. That is, the story has an interest in the future, not just the past and the present.

This passage sets the stage for the many similar passages that follow. Therefore, it is appropriate to conclude that the narrative theology that follows in a consecutive canonical reading of the Bible takes its form and substance from the Torah. In this very fundamental way all narrative theology is Mosaic. It is anchored in the Torah's ways of expression, though it feels free to use the elements found here in creative and sometimes surprising ways.

## II. *Joshua 23–24 and the "Settled Israel"*

By the time one reaches the summaries encased in Josh 23–24, one has entered the Prophets section of the canon. For its part, Israel has entered the Promised Land, more or less conquered it (Josh 1–12) and divided it (Josh 13–21). They have achieved much of what Moses envisioned in Deut 1–4 and have also failed in some of the ways he feared as well. Yahweh has settled them for the first time in their history.<sup>20</sup> Between Deut 4 and Josh 1, Moses delivers the rest of the covenantal material in Deuteronomy and entrusts the Torah to Joshua and the people (see Deut 31:1–9). He also blesses Israel one last time before dying (in Deut 32–34). In effect, this blessing constitutes a type of summary that mirrors Jacob's in Gen 49. Moses adds blessings for covenantal obedience and consequences for covenantal disobedience (see Deut 27–28), a passage that parallels its sister passage Lev 26 in its power to help Israel choose to write its own future story. Now Joshua, in the last days of his work, adds his own pair of summaries to those of Moses. His account intersects with that of Moses at many points, yet he clearly shapes the implications and details of that story to the situation at hand.

The first summary reminds his audience of truths also found in Deut 4:25–26 and 6:13–15, Josh 1, and Josh 2–12. Because Yahweh has fought for Israel (23:1–5; see Josh 1–12), in keeping with all his promises (23:14; see 1:1–18), the people should willingly obey "the Book of the Law of Moses" (23:6; see 1:1–9) by rejecting other gods and refusing marriage to adherents of those gods (23:7–13; see Deut 6:13–15). Failure to obey will result in loss of the Promised Land (23:16; see Deut 4:25–26; 28:15–68). This speech asserts that God has overcome all military obstacles to the fulfillment of his promises. Now Israel must overcome the religious obstacles to covenantal faithfulness if they wish to enjoy the

<sup>19</sup> Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, 34.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 513.

benefits of the land. They have done well so far (23:8), but failure to adhere to Yahweh alone will lead to Yahweh's using the people of the land as whips and scorpions to discipline Israel (23:13).

The second summary unfolds within an exhortatory speech coming in the form of a prophetic word, much as Deut 1–4 does. Here Joshua begins with Terah, Abram, and the previously undisclosed fact that they worshiped other gods when they lived “beyond the Euphrates” (24:2). Next Joshua relates Yahweh's bringing Abram out of his father's land, and states that Yahweh blessed Abram with children (24:3–4). As in Deut 2:1–8, Joshua mentions the gift of land to Esau (24:4). He then details Israel's time in Egypt, the deliverance from Egypt, the victories on the east side of the Jordan, and the conquest of the Promised Land (24:5–13). Joshua does not mention the Sinai law at this time, but the book has already referenced Moses' law in 1:1–9 and the national covenant with Yahweh in 23:16. In effect, then, Joshua has shaped this narrative of Israel's past as a journey from a foreign land to a land of promise by the descendants of persons who worshiped other gods. Just as Abram made that journey from idolatry to faith in one God so Israel must make the same journey at this point in time. Israel's future depends on the acceptance of this journey as their own.

As Moses does in Deuteronomy, Joshua tells the story in a way calculated to bring Israel to a decision; he has not just told an engaging account of the national history. Three responses are expected to flow from this relationship: fear of the Lord, service of the Lord, and rejection of other gods (24:14). These impulses were evident in Exod 19:1–20:17, for the people respected Yahweh's awesome presence on the mountain (Exod 19:7–25), agreed to do Yahweh's will (19:8), and received the Ten Commandments that reflected their relationship with their God (20:1–17). Israel agrees to the covenant in Exod 24:1–4. Joshua asks for a similar response here, but he warns the people that Yahweh cannot be fooled. Monotheism alone pleases Yahweh (24:15–20). No rivals are allowed. Gerhard von Rad observes, “As far as we can see, this cultic intolerance is something unique in the history of religion.”<sup>21</sup> Israel agrees to this covenant, despite Joshua's earnest warnings to be serious about their commitment, and Joshua writes their pledge in the book of God's law (Josh 24:27). He knows what can happen in the future, for he has seen the past.

Joshua's narrative forces his people to decide how to live as settled, landed people. They have stopped journeying. They can now live either as Abraham did in Canaan or as Terah did beyond the Euphrates. Covenant fidelity to the only God, the one who delivered their ancestors from idolatry and slavery, remains the most vital issue in their lives.<sup>22</sup> As readers have already learned, possession of the land is not automatic but is rather dependent on adherence to the owner and giver of the land.

For now, Israel is once again brave and obedient Israel. What they will become in the future remains to be seen. For his part, Yahweh remains the one

<sup>21</sup> Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 26.

<sup>22</sup> For a discussion of the relational nature of covenantal fidelity, see Elmer A. Martens, *God's Design: A Focus on Old Testament Theology* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 78.



who creates relationship through promise keeping and deliverance, and he remains the one who punishes unfaithfulness. In other words, he remains compassionate and merciful, yet unwilling to clear the guilty—all at the same time (see Exod 34:6-7). Israel is now in the Promised Land, but old settings haunt the story. Israel's tenure in the land is dependent on the owner of the land's granting them that privilege. If they live as their ancestors did beyond the Euphrates, or if they live as they did at times in the desert, then they may well find themselves back in those settings. At best, they will find themselves tenants of the original inhabitants instead of lords of Canaan. The story continues to be told; it continues to be written; it continues to be applied to new audiences.

### III. *Judges 1–2, First Samuel 12, and Israel's Enslavement in Their Own Land*

The era of the judges is probably the most desperate epoch in the history of Israel. Alongside certain treatments of the wilderness period, these accounts provide later writers with a great deal of ammunition about the nation's unfaithfulness. Yet they also provide later writers ammunition for depicting great heroines and heroes of faith (see Ruth and Heb 11). These persons of faith are particularly significant because they exercised their faith in such difficult times.

The canon's treatment of this era begins and ends with similar, bookend summaries. Judges 1 gives a summary of Israel's conquest activities, with the main emphasis falling on their failure to complete the task. Judges 2 begins with the exodus and ends with Israel's cycle of sin, punishment, crying out, reception of grace, deliverance, and subsequent fall into sin again. Israel's unfaithfulness is matched by Yahweh's disciplining of Israel, and this pattern lasts for decades. One could even argue it lasts until Josiah's reign.

First Samuel 12 offers the farewell speech of Samuel, who is in effect the last judge. Samuel's speech in 1 Sam 12 instructs Israel in how they can flourish under a monarchy. He examines their history from the exodus onward in order to link their asking for a king to past rebellions (12:1-18). With this background in place, he calls them to fear and serve Yahweh based on God's great acts on their behalf, an exhortation that summarizes the Pentateuch (12:24-25). This challenge is undergirded by Samuel's conviction that Yahweh will not abandon Israel because of the importance of maintaining his character and reputation (12:22). Adherence to Yahweh will result in success, but forsaking Yahweh will lead to disaster (12:19-25), just as Deut 27–28 has already warned. The monarchy is no more doomed to failure than the system of the judges or the leadership of Moses and Joshua was.

Both summaries present Israel as a people trapped in their own land, as people serving other nations because they have served other gods, and as people in need of redemption and obedience at all times. Thus, the summaries depict Israel much as the wilderness stories do, yet also in a manner that will lead later characters as different as Daniel and Ezra to speak of their situation in terms very much like the ones found here. The multiple appearances of judges-era

and wilderness references later in the canon indicate that these episodes may need more treatment in Biblical Theology than they have received in the past.

Characterization in these texts matches earlier patterns and also strikes out in new directions. Yahweh's character remains ready to bless Israel in the land, yet unwilling to allow unending covenantal unfaithfulness. This has been his pattern since at least Exod 34:6-7. Once again, Israel wavers between being a brave and faithful group and being a defiant and pathetic group. Once again, the nations serve as foils to Israel's conduct. New foes such as the Philistines appear to take the place of Egypt and Bashan. Samuel makes final statements, and some of these make him look like a bitter old man, while others make him seem balanced and helpful to Yahweh and Israel.<sup>23</sup> In these and other ways, he is more like Moses than like Joshua. Perhaps the greatest change in the overall story line is the introduction of Israel's kings, which is a character group that is as flexible as the people.

The purpose of Samuel's farewell speech is much like those given by Moses and Joshua. The old prophet-judge calls the people to covenantal faithfulness at the dawn of a new epoch in the nation's history. They now have a king, and the people and their monarch must decide how this change will mesh with the Sinai covenant. Of course Deut 17:14-20 has already anticipated this development, but now the time has come. Peter Miscall writes, "In vv. 14-15, Samuel presents the people with the choice of obeying or not obeying the Lord; the king moves into the background and merges with the people. Samuel now stands in association with the Lord against the people and their king."<sup>24</sup> Miscall also observes that there is no offer of reward here. Samuel simply stresses obedience either because the people understand the punishments that go with disobedience or because he does not think they will obey.<sup>25</sup> Regardless, the call is clear enough. Israel stands at a crossroads as they did in Moses' and Joshua's times. What they decide now will affect their lives for generations to come.

#### IV. *Second Kings 17: Israel's Failure in the Land*

Near the end of the Former Prophets, 2 Kgs 17 offers a summary of Israelite history that ends with the fall of Israel and Judah, though the latter event is only foreshadowed here (see 17:20). In this depiction, the nation has fallen due to the worship of other gods (17:7, 34-40). They have acted as the people in the era of the judges acted. While doing so they unwittingly inched ever closer to the time when the threats of Lev 26 and Deut 27-28 would be realized. They eventually write the narrative equivalent of a national suicide note.

Once again, Yahweh is portrayed as deliverer from Egypt, giver of the covenant, and giver of the Promised Land. He is also depicted as the one who tore Israel into two parts when Solomon died (17:21), and the one who sent all the

<sup>23</sup> See Peter D. Miscall, *1 Samuel: A Literary Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 72-73.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 75-76.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

prophets who appear in 1 and 2 Kings to warn the people to turn from their sins or face the punishments outlined in Lev 26 and Deut 27–28. This latter significant addition to previous summaries appears as a staple in later summaries. In fact, the main characters in the books of the Latter Prophets offer eloquent testimony of this aspect of the national narrative. The witness of 2 Kgs 17 is that Yahweh has done what earlier texts threatened he would do. Moses' and Joshua's fears have been realized.

Israel as a group could hardly be portrayed in a more negative light than they are here. Like their desert-era fathers, they have rebelled against Yahweh's standards because they did not believe in the Lord (17:14; see Num 14:11-12; Ps 78:21-22). Like the people of the judges era they were stubborn sinners who abandoned the commandments, burned their children as sacrifices to idols, sold themselves to do evil, and thus virtually forced Yahweh to carry out the covenant curses (17:15-18). Only Judah remained after Samaria's demise, and Judah sinned in a like manner. Therefore, Yahweh allowed plunderers to harass Judah and eventually let Judah's enemies carry the people away (17:18-20). This last description indicates that the writer of the summary treats the latter years of Judah's national life as a return to the days of the judges, when Israel was sinful, punished through foreign invasion and oppression, and occasionally delivered by God-appointed leaders. Nonetheless, the book of Kings as a whole includes the stories of several faithful persons. Yahweh was never without followers (see 1 Kgs 19:18). Sadly, they suffered with the unfaithful in these years.

The nations fare no better in this summary. They are treated as plunderers, idolaters, and syncretists (17:21-41). They are tools in the hands of Yahweh for Israel's destruction, yet some of them are also exposed to the truths of the Sinai covenant (17:29-41). Syria in particular has access to Yahweh's prophets, and Naaman, a Syrian military leader, confesses faith in Yahweh because of Elisha's ministry (see 2 Kgs 5:1-14). The nations are not as culpable for their actions as Israel, but they are guilty as well. It is important, too, to note that Naaman proves that a remnant of faithful non-Israelites also existed.

When this summary closes, readers have been exposed to several distinct paradigmatic eras. They have learned of the time before Abram traveled beyond the Euphrates, Abram's travels in Canaan, the sojourn in Egypt, the exodus, the desert years, the conquest of Canaan, the judges epoch, the monarchy's glories in David's and Solomon's reigns and subsequent descent into a new judges-era-type situation, and the exile. Key characters such as Yahweh, Israel, the nations, and David have become fully developed characters. Physical settings such as Egypt, Canaan, Zion, the temple, and the desert have developed into symbols and metaphors. Events such as the exodus, the making of the Sinai covenant, the making of the Davidic covenant, and the fall of Samaria have become more than past occurrences. They are now ways of understanding the present and grasping the future.

In short, the elements of later full-orbed prophetic summaries such as those found in Isa 40–48; Jer 2–6; Ezek 16, 20, and 23; Hos 1–2; and others are now in place. The Latter Prophets make tremendous use of the events and imagery

found in the Law and Former Prophets. They make particular use of the Davidic covenant that is crucial to Christian faith and proclamation. With regret, I will pass over these texts in favor of examining briefly the use of the great narrative scheme in selected psalms. This choice is made in part because of space, but also because there is a growing interest in the wholeness of the Psalter that narrative theology may aid.

V. *Psalms 78, 89, 104–106 and the History of Israel*

Several passages in the Writings utilize the summary elements already described. As will be noted below, some of the most interesting and theologically weighted of these summaries appear in Psalms. Ezra 9–10, Neh 9, and Dan 9:1–19 also deserve detailed treatment, particularly since they include the ignoring of the prophets, the exile, and pleas for renewal in their summaries. These latter three texts also indicate how later individuals and larger audiences appropriated earlier events to facilitate confession, repentance, and public policy after the exile.

It is important to note that the summaries in the Prophets and the Psalms are often in non-narrative texts. This fact indicates that the great narrative structure of Israel's story sustained texts of various genres. It also indicates that the great narrative sustained writers from a broad range of times. Though many significant examples of these principles exist in the canon after 2 Kgs 17, perhaps none are as sweeping in scope as those found in Books 3–4 of Psalms. Here one finds virtually the entire cast of characters, settings, and events used in the service of the theology embodied in Israelite worship. This narrative emphasis is hardly a departure from the main pattern of the book of Psalms. As Bernhard Anderson writes:

The "narrative" mode is evident throughout the Psalter, especially in a number of psalms in which Israel's praise takes the form of recounting Yahweh's "deeds of salvation" (e.g., Ps. 66:5–7; 71:15–16; 75:1; 77:11–15; 98:1–3; 107:31–32; 145:4–6). . . . One gets the impression from reading and contemplating these psalms that they have a strong didactic interest: history is recounted in order to teach people the meaning of their history.<sup>26</sup>

For instance, Ps 78 surveys Israelite history with all the applicational vigor of Judg 1–2, 1 Sam 12, and 2 Kgs 17. In doing so it brings to mind the past, connects readers to previous psalms (see Pss 66, 71, 75, 77), and prefigures later summaries such as Pss 89 and 104–106. The passage opens with the declaration that the psalm is meant to warn readers to avoid the mistakes of the past (78:1–8), to avoid becoming negative characters in such a sad story. This account claims that Yahweh released Israel from bondage, only to have the people rebel consistently in the desert due to a lack of belief (78:9–51; see Num 14:11–12). No positive desert images are used here. Yahweh gave them Canaan, yet they venerated idols (78:52–66). Nonetheless, Yahweh gave them David (78:67–72).

<sup>26</sup> Bernhard Anderson, *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today* (rev. ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), 53–54.

What will happen next? The psalm ends without a prediction, but readers know the historical pattern is not hopeful. Israel's history has included one act of Yahweh's grace after another, but most of the time a majority of Israelites has rejected this grace. Thus, one could easily expect divine displeasure to result, and Ps 79 may well provide a description of that displeasure.

Though Pss 79–88 can be read as relating to subjects germane to the period between the institution of the Davidic lineage and the demise of Judah, Ps 89 clearly completes the story begun in Ps 78. Psalm 89 provides a venue for one of the canon's most serious issues. Yahweh promised David an enduring kingdom in 2 Sam 7, a promise reflected in Ps 89:19–37. At this point in time, however, Yahweh has let the dynasty cease, or so it seems. The psalmist therefore understandably wonders what has become of this promise (89:38–45). Indeed the writer's dismay is palpable.<sup>27</sup> This shock leads to questions of time (“How long?”) and of space (“Where is your former love?”) that reflect human mortality and physical limitations.<sup>28</sup> Such questions are every bit as heartrending as any asked in Job or Jeremiah.

By stressing Yahweh's power and truthfulness (89:1–37) the psalmist seems to understand that the answers to these questions lie ultimately in the character of Yahweh revealed in the great narrative. As H. J. Kraus claims, Yahweh's faithfulness is the main theme of 89:19–37 even if this faithfulness seems to be at risk now.<sup>29</sup> By reflecting on this situation, one is reminded of the suffering David himself endured before and after becoming king. Indeed, his personal summary of his own life in 2 Sam 22:1–23:7 is cast in terms of Yahweh's continual deliverance. Suffering is part of the Davidic legacy for all his heirs to experience, as is Yahweh's deliverance in times of trouble. Perhaps the twin beliefs in Yahweh's unfailing character and the pattern of Davidic suffering and deliverance fuel the doxology that closes the passage (see 89:52).

Psalms 90–106 present a summary of the theology for those waiting for deliverance between the fall of the Davidic dynasty in Ps 89 and the rejoicing at this era's end in Ps 107:1–3. Psalm 90 begins the section by taking readers back to the time before creation in a psalm ascribed to Moses. Regardless of historical situation, Yahweh is God “from everlasting to everlasting” (90:2). Yahweh's greatness in creation and the exodus must be recalled and applied in prayers for Yahweh's return (90:13–17). Human beings are frail by comparison (90:3–11). Their future depends on their relationship with their creator. Taking refuge in Yahweh (Ps 91), rejoicing in worship (Ps 92), and embracing Yahweh's kingly roles as sustainer and judge (Pss 93–100) are prerequisites for walking in integrity with Yahweh and finding his face again (Pss 101–102). Those who go back to these basic tenets of Israelite faith can bless Yahweh and confess that his steadfast love is “from everlasting to everlasting” (103:17; see 90:2) and that he

<sup>27</sup> Claus Westermann, *Elements of Old Testament Theology* (trans. Douglas W. Stott; Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 66.

<sup>28</sup> James Luther Mays, *Psalms* (IBC; Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 287.

<sup>29</sup> H. J. Kraus, *Psalms 60–150* (trans. Hilton C. Oswald; CC; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 211.

“has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all” (103:19). In short, those who wait for the renewal of the Davidic lineage ought to revel in Yahweh’s kingship over the entire earth. As 1 Sam 12 indicates, Israel had a king before Saul or David arrived. Yahweh was that king, and he is king of creation, not simply king of Israel.

With these notions in place, Pss 104–106 retrace the steps of Israelite history from creation to the sending of David. The exile is probably assumed, given Ps 89. The aim is apparently to bring the people back to the point of waiting for the renewal of the Davidic lineage. Only a people settled in the convictions found in Pss 90–103 are ready for this return. Psalm 104 celebrates Yahweh’s creation of and care for the earth in distinctly wisdom terms reminiscent of Prov 8:22-31 and Job 28.<sup>30</sup> Psalm 104:24 exults, “O Yahweh, how manifold are your works! In wisdom have you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.” Kraus observes that vv. 19-24 are close in form to Egyptian encyclopedias of science lists.<sup>31</sup> Wisdom statements and praise blend here, for praise is the natural response of all who grasp the magnitude of recognizing Yahweh as the only creator and sustainer (104:31-35).<sup>32</sup> Prayers for removal of the wicked are also appropriate to the context, for creation emphases and judgment oracles are hardly strangers to one another in the Bible (see Amos 4:13; 5:8-9), and Yahweh’s power and right to judge have been firmly established in Pss 90–100.

Psalm 105 continues the summary. Now the text acknowledges God’s covenant with the patriarchs (105:1-15), Israel’s deliverance through Joseph (105:16-25), and the exodus (105:26-45). All these blessings occurred because Yahweh “remembers his covenant from everlasting” (see 90:2 and 103:17). Even the exile and loss of the Davidic lineage cannot change this fact. As in Ps 78, the history of Israel is told as one act of divine grace after another. But in this psalm there is no mention of Israel’s failures.

Psalm 106 takes up the more negative themes, yet also keeps the grace theme in play by recalling past restorations. Israel rebelled at the Red Sea, but Yahweh still delivered them (vv. 6-12). They sinned in the desert, yet Yahweh forgave them (vv. 13-23). Due to their lack of faith, they refused to enter Canaan (vv. 24-33). When Yahweh gave them the land they served idols, but Yahweh rescued them when they cried out because he recalled the covenant and loved them (vv. 34-46). If Yahweh pardoned all those transgressions, the psalmist reasons, then it is possible that he will renew the people once more (v. 47). Thus, the concluding doxology of Book 4 blesses Yahweh for his indomitable, sustaining grace (v. 48). As Kraus writes, “But above all it was Yahweh’s covenant faithfulness (v. 45) that permitted mercy to rule in an abundance of grace (v. 45).”<sup>33</sup> This grace makes it possible that the people’s cries will be heard again, just as they were heard in Egypt, in the era of the judges, and during the monarchy. It is possible, then, that

<sup>30</sup> See Leo G. Perdue, *The Theology of Wisdom Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 82.

<sup>31</sup> Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 301.

<sup>32</sup> Elmer A. Martens, *God’s Design: A Focus on Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 163.

<sup>33</sup> Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 322.

the people may be gathered from the places where they have been taken (106:47). Psalm 107:1-3 confirms that such divine grace does indeed occur in due time. It confirms that Yahweh relents “according to the abundance of his steadfast love” (106:45; see Exod 34:6-7). Such is Yahweh’s character.

Psalms 90–106 are a veritable canonical catalog of Yahweh’s work with two exceptions. The Zion and David themes are virtually absent, though they are perhaps the driving force behind the question addressed in most of the section. Only repentance based on agreement with Moses and the Prophets can recapture the hope inherent in Israel’s history. When that repentance is born and reaches maturity, however, a remnant ready to return to Zion will then emerge (see Pss 120–134). The God who alone is from everlasting to everlasting will effect this return for the chastened and wise faithful ones, for Yahweh’s character can do no less.

Ezra, Nehemiah, and Daniel certainly pray as if they believe such is the case. The same is true for Zechariah in Luke 1:68-79 and Paul in 1 Cor 10:11.<sup>34</sup> Paul writes that such things were written for “our examples,” thereby including the Corinthians in the story. This fact indicates that today’s readers may also enter the story. Bernhard Anderson claims, “This historical accent in the Psalter holds the possibility of bringing these songs of worship closer to where we live. We too are historical beings, and if we are to know God at all, our knowledge will be a historical knowledge. . . . The Christian church has inherited this historical legacy, minus the nationalistic tones that sounded at times in Israel’s scriptures.”<sup>35</sup> Whatever one may conclude about Anderson’s comment about “nationalistic tones,” his comments are apt. Of course, if there is one part of the Old Testament that Christian churches have used regularly in worship it is the Psalter. The important thing to recall is that the historical summary is as important for application as the individual psychological and spiritual effects often highlighted in worship services.

#### VI. *Concluding Observations for Whole Bible Theology*

Christian theologians have long believed that the Old Testament can exist as a discrete witness, but also that it can be read as literature that leads naturally to the New Testament. It is important to admit that it is not blatantly obvious to all but the most obstinate reader that such is the case. Other reading strategies can lead to other conclusions, yet it is just as important to assert that reading the New Testament in light of and as a continuation of the Old Testament is not a forced pattern. One way that this case can be made is by noting the continuation of historical summaries in the New Testament and observing several implications for Biblical Theology and for preaching the scriptures that arise from this process.

First, summaries similar to those surveyed above appear in the New Testament. Short versions occur. For example, Jesus includes his generation in the history of Israelite rebellion. In his retelling of Isaiah’s “Song of the Vineyard”

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Anderson, *Out of the Depths*, 55.

(Isa 5:1-7), he makes his listeners the latest in a long line of rebellious landholders, and they know he has condemned them (Matt 21:33-46). He then notes that his audience thinks they would have spared the prophets had they been alive at the time, but Jesus considers them the group that finishes off the prophets (Matt 22:29-36). He clearly disagrees with the way they put themselves into the story.

Two longer summaries also deserve mention. Stephen's account of Israelite history from Abraham's time until David's fits the pattern found in Pss 78, 89, and 104-106 (Acts 7:1-50). Indeed, Stephen ends his treatment with David, as those psalms do. He applies his account to his audience by claiming that his generation has acted like their fathers by killing prophets, and, worse yet, killing Jesus, "the Righteous One," the Messiah (Acts 7:51-53). Stephen's audience did not embrace the theology of Pss 90-106. They did not look to the creator, to his kingdom, or to his Davidic servant. Thus, they continued the wrong strain of Israelite history.

In Acts 13:13-43 Paul also recounts the history of Israel when speaking to a Jewish audience. He too begins with Abraham, includes the exodus, mentions the era of the judges, and moves to David. Once again, his account sounds like Ps 78 or 106. He then treats Jesus as the fulfillment of the Davidic promise and the gospel as the latest installment in the history of Abraham and David's family. He claims his audience may be ignorant of or disobedient to the totality of the canon and God's ongoing work in history. Of course, he encounters even more difficulties in Acts 13:44-52 when he puts the gentiles into the story. But put them there he does, and they stay in Paul's story to the end of his ministry (see Gal 6:16).

Second, since these and other short and long summaries exist in the New Testament, we may need to determine if we have emphasized the exile to the exclusion of desert and judges-era texts (see 1 Cor 10:1-11, for example). What I mean is that the Old Testament uses both traditions in similar ways to apply to different audiences. In Jerusalem, Ezra and Nehemiah pray that "we are slaves this day; in the land that you gave to our fathers to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts, behold, we are slaves" (Neh 9:36; see Ezra 9:1-9). In exile, Daniel prays for the desolation of Jerusalem to end (9:1-19). The former prayers are offered in light of the era of the judges, and the latter in light of the loss of land and temple. By Jesus' time both situations remained relevant. Jews lived outside and inside Israel. Those in the land felt enslaved to Rome, and those outside of Israel felt in exile. If so, then they were living in the setting addressed in Pss 90-106. What happened next depended on embracing "Yahweh as King" theology and awaiting Yahweh's word on the Davidic dynasty. It may be that when Jesus did not prove to be a new conquering Joshua, a new delivering judge, or a new Philistine-smashing David, he proved a disappointment on several levels to several groups. The fact that believers did not share this disappointment may well have something to do with how they perceived the era of the judges as much as how they perceived the exile.



Third, we need to hardwire “narrative preaching” to the text more intentionally. The Bible itself includes summaries that place readers in the story. In fact, the Bible asserts that the story continues. It asserts that we have a place and role in that story. There are many examples of this tendency that include many settings. Thus, it is not necessary to offer “narrative preaching” that announces a verse and then tells several contemporary stories. The biblical story needs to dictate the message, and it offers sufficient diversity of setting to engage current audiences without jettisoning the biblical narrative for something we deem more relevant. The narrative was relevant for very diverse audiences and remains so now.

Fourth, we may need to connect historical and literary analysis more often. How a story is told is relevant in historical and literary studies. These two disciplines complement one another. As Brooks states rather playfully, “The notion that Clio, the muse of history, has a quarrel with her sister muses goes on vociferously. It is, however, a modern invention. Neither Hesiod nor other of the ancient authorities refers to a tiff among the sisterhood.”<sup>36</sup> He adds:

Nevertheless, some of her later devotees have set up their own bickering factions, though there are surely no real grounds for jealous conflict between the proponents of history and those who are primarily concerned with what used to be called *belles lettres*. The activities they practice are in fact thoroughly compatible and often mutually supportive. Sometimes the biographer, the literary historian, and the lexicographer hold the keys necessary for unlocking a poem’s full meaning, especially if the poem dates from an earlier time. We must remember, however, that such information as the biographer or historian can provide cannot in itself determine literary value.<sup>37</sup>

This attitude is essential to a healthy partnership of history and literature in narrative theology.

Fifth, in offering summaries of Israel we may need to remember the consistent characterization of Yahweh and Israel found in scripture. We must emphasize God’s grace and Israel’s faithful remnant instead of simply stressing Israel’s failures and Yahweh’s judgment of them. In other words, we need to recall that both 1 Cor 10 and Heb 11 are accurate and useful applications of Israel’s story. Exodus 34:6-7 explains Yahweh’s multi-dimensional character from the book of Exodus to the book of James. Israel’s victories and failures are depicted in a consistent fashion as well. Protecting this balance will keep narrative theology from pits that have snared other types of analysis.

In short, now may be a good time to link literature, history, proclamation, and theology in the service of the academy and the church. Narrative theology of the type I describe here may have positive effects. Though one can certainly start at a different methodological place than I have in this article,<sup>38</sup> I hope that at least parts of this article will make this starting point a valid and helpful one.

<sup>36</sup> Brooks, *Historical Evidence*, 1.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> For an examination of treatments of Hebrew narrative with a view to arguing against the narrative unity of the Old Testament see D. M. Gunn, “Hebrew Narrative,” in *Text in Context: Essays by Members of the Society for Old Testament Study* (ed. A. D. H. Mayes; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 223-57.

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