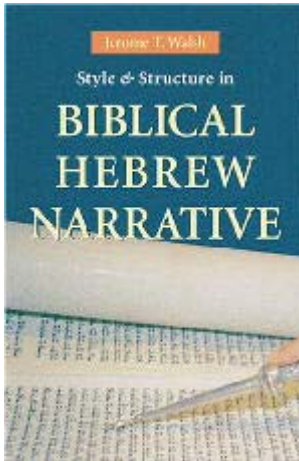


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Walsh, Jerome T.

Style and Structure in Biblical Hebrew Narrative

Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001. Pp. xiv + 205,
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While Jerome Walsh's book is intended as an introduction to the structural complexities of biblical narrative, it is filled with sophisticated insights. Although he touches briefly on other aspects of narrative, it is structure which most fully occupies the author as a source of meaning. This includes the configuration of both smaller and larger units, from verses (and partial verses) to pericopes of various length, to chapters, to entire books such as 1 and 2 Kings. Walsh's examples encompass a broad spectrum of narratives, illustrating a wide range of structural possibilities. The selection includes both well-worked pericopes such as the garden story and the Jacob cycle in Genesis, as well as lesser studied texts like Lev 24:13-23 and 2 Kgs 9:14-11:20. Walsh builds nicely upon the work of previous scholars, invariably adding his own twist to established readings.

Walsh divides his discussion into three sections. The first, which covers two thirds of the entire book, is devoted to "structures of organization", namely elements of symmetry and assymetry in their diverse forms: chiasmic, concentric, multiple and partial symmetries, and inclusions and epitomes of different types. Characteristic of Walsh's analyses is his attention to various dynamics within the text beyond the assigned category. Thus Gen 2:18-25 is discussed as an example of "forward symmetry" - the repetition of parallel structures in identical order (ABCA'B'C') - yet the explication of the text integrates the use of a variety of elements to bring out the importance and complexity of the parallel. Similarly, the discussion of Esth 5:9-14—Haman's reversal—serves as an example of partial symmetry, but is also attentive to additional patterns which add to the pivotal function of the pericope. Gen 11:1-9, the tower of Babel episode, serves to illustrate Walsh's notion of compound symmetry. He builds upon Fokkelman's analysis of the chiasmic structure of the story and contrasts it with an

examination of the alternation of narrative and discourse in the text. The resulting discussion nicely demonstrates the interaction between two different levels of structure. These are but a few examples from among many. It is unclear if Walsh intends his taxonomy of structures to be exhaustive, however the breadth of examples enriches the potential for understanding meaningful repetition and variation within biblical narrative.

The second section, entitled “structures of disjunction”, discusses elements which act as indications of separation between sections: changes in character, setting and narrative voice, repetition which serves to mark the end of a section, and interruptions in the sequential progression of the narrative. For example, the variations in narrative voice ascribed to Solomon in 1 Kgs 3:16-28 are pointed out nicely, as is the structural function of the change in focus in 3:24, the key moment in the narrative when Solomon stops listening, reflects, and acts. Likewise the discussion of narrative sequence provides a good introductory description of the difference between *qatal* and *vayiqtol* forms as sequence and non-sequence. Among many interesting examples, Walsh’s discussion of the break in narrative sequence in Gen 41:47-42:5 in order to make way for the appearance of Joseph’s brothers in 42:6 is an impressive attempt to make literary and structural sense of a highly repetitive passage. While the examples throughout this section are interesting, the structural aspect of these elements illustrates only a limited aspect of complex phenomena such as character and voice, resulting in what feels like a rather incomplete treatment of the topic.

The third (and briefest) section, “structures of conjunction”, presents some illustrations of linking elements which Walsh terms “threads”, “links”, and “hinges”, which serve to join together discrete units in subtle ways. A thread can be a motif, theme or word that recurs a number of times; a link is substantively the same but occurs much less often. Thus the thread of hospitality unites Gen 18-19, while *rwm* (“naked/clever”) in Gen 2:25-3:1 serves as a link between Genesis 2 and 3. A hinge joins together two distinct units, as in the reversed repetition of the phrase “heaven and earth” in Gen. 2:4. While Walsh’s examples here do not break new ground as he does in the previous sections, his taxonomy is a useful way of describing different types of connections between stories.

The book is written in an open and uncomplicated style which is intended for a reader with no knowledge of Hebrew, and apparently with little interest in or knowledge of source critical issues. The analysis of each section is relatively short, but Walsh’s nuanced readings enable him to highlight not just the larger structural elements, but something of the subtle interplay between these components as well. While the structure of the book is arranged according to the formal categories described above, the actual analysis of the texts avoids predictable labelling, and uses the repetitive elements to bring out the subtle artistry of the narrative.

Despite the author’s stated intention to address a non-scholarly audience, the technical mastery required to appreciate the subtlety of Walsh’s readings is considerable. There is much for experienced readers to enjoy, but one wonders how other readers will fare with this. Many of these clever insights are of interest only after one has a sense of the meaning of the larger whole. Moreover, it is not clear why these particular textual

examples have been chosen, why they are arranged in this order, and how they are to help the reader to implement these techniques. While the first section describes a movement from shorter to longer units as an organizing principle, such a clear method of organization is not immediately discernible in subsequent chapters. Each example is well crafted, but it is unclear how it contributes to an understanding of a larger whole. As a result the usefulness of the book as a guide to the structural analysis of other texts is somewhat limited.

A more serious problem resides in the unstated poetic assumptions of the book. One cannot ignore the fact that structure is deeply influenced by the poetics of interpretation of a given text, nor can one treat the components of structure as essentially empirical elements, open to all readers in the same way. The author's general discussion of the function of structure in literature at the beginning of the book should address these poetic questions. The specificity of the examples needs to be balanced with more far-reaching statements about meaning in literature, and in biblical literature specifically. Despite the above limitations, Walsh has written an engaging and valuable book. He has succeeded in opening the eyes of this reader to intricate structures which illuminate even the driest texts, from annalistic reports to building descriptions, and in bringing out a sense of complexity and design in what seem to be straightforward descriptive lists. He avoids the frequent pitfall of a formulaic approach common to many structural studies by offering nuanced readings which demonstrate the ability of structural devices to add to our understanding of the complex rhetorical aims of biblical narrative.