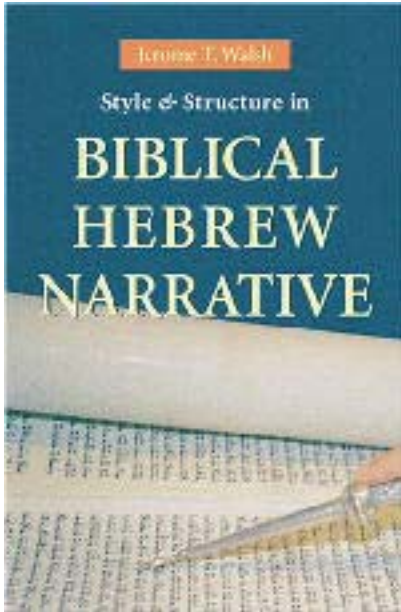


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Walsh, Jerome T.

Style and Structure in Biblical Hebrew Narrative

Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2001. Pp. xiv + 205. Paper. \$19.95. ISBN 0814658970.

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Jerome T. Walsh has produced a unique and valuable resource for those interested in narrative study of the Hebrew Bible. While many good introductions to this subject exist, Walsh has provided what is primarily a reference book for those engaged in narrative study. The vast majority of this volume is devoted to a catalogue of examples of each of the narrative phenomena Walsh describes.

Walsh explains in his introduction that his primary aim is to help Bible readers who do not have access to the original language of the text observe the techniques of Hebrew narrative prose. This goal and his hope that use of the book might move beyond that to the attention of those who read Biblical Hebrew are more than fulfilled. He divides his work into three major parts. Part 1 examines narrative patterns that serve to organize texts. Part 2 illustrates the techniques used in Hebrew narrative to delineate boundaries between texts. Finally, part 3 looks at devices used to connect literary units. Those who read Hebrew and those who do not will find this organization of narrative techniques and examples of them extremely useful.

In part 1, "Structures of Organization," Walsh introduces the concepts of symmetry and repetition, explaining how these phenomena are used to organize narrative texts and how

observation of them might aid interpretation. He then presents sixty-four illustrative texts under six major headings: reverse symmetry, forward symmetry, alternating repetition, partial symmetry, multiple symmetry, and asymmetry. Two characteristics enhance Walsh's choice of examples. First, there is a great variety of length, nature, and complexity from the concentric sound pattern in Num 12:13 to the forward symmetry of Gen 1 to the multiple symmetry of the entire book of Ruth to the thematic, concentric symmetry of the entire book of Kings. Second, the illustrations range from those that many readers have observed before, and that could hardly be disputed, to more debatable examples that many readers will not find fully convincing. The former description would certainly fit the concentric verbal pattern in Jonah 1. On the other hand, I was not fully convinced by the concentric symmetrical pattern of Gen 2:4b–3:24, which was based upon aspects of theme, characterization, and setting. Such diversity illustrates well both the genuine prospects and problems of this approach to biblical literature.

Part 2, "Structures of Disjunction," explores the elements of biblical narrative that establish boundaries between literary units. By Walsh's own admission, the first of three major groupings of such structures is relatively simple. Biblical authors used changes in character, setting, and narrative voice to mark such boundaries, just as writers in most other languages do. The second type of structure, repetition, is a bit more complicated. Repetition can play an integrating role within biblical narrative, but Walsh focuses here on the kind of unnecessary repetitions that mark boundaries. These are of three types: "gratuitous repetition of information the reader already knows, unnecessary repetition of subject nouns, and unnecessary interruption of direct speech" (145). Here, particularly, Walsh takes up the concerns of "text linguistics" and amply displays examples of such uses of repetition. Walsh correctly identifies the third major group of disjunctive structures as the most difficult and significant. The phenomenon he labels "narrative sequence" is difficult to illustrate, or translate, in English and typically goes unobserved by English readers of the Bible. Walsh's attempt to rectify this situation is admirable. In all, part 2 presents a catalogue of forty-four examples of disjunctive narrative structure.

In part 3, "Structures of Conjunction," Walsh acknowledges and builds upon the work of H. Van Dyke Parunak. Walsh discusses and provides examples of five different kinds of narrative devices that serve to connect separate literary units. As in parts 1 and 2, there is significant overlap among the categories into which these conjunctive devices are divided. Walsh illustrates the use of "threads" and "links" and their combined use in "linked threads." The other two types of devices are "hinges" and "double-duty hinges."

While Walsh's catalogue of examples, 130 in all, is the most valuable aspect of the book, he has risked going a step further by drawing conclusions about the interpretive value of his observations. Among the most important of these is that "[t]here is a general

correlation between the symmetrical pattern that organizes a text and the interpretive dynamic that is suitable for the narrative” (192). These conclusions place upon the reader the challenge to read and reread a text very closely. Perhaps most urgently, for Walsh, they place an obligation upon translators to produce vernacular Bibles that pay attention to the literary features of biblical narrative.

Walsh has done a great service for readers at many levels. This book could serve as an introductory textbook in biblical narrative. In addition, scholars who have paid little attention to the progress of narrative studies would find this volume a good place to begin. Teachers, like myself, in fields related to biblical narrative will find valuable additions to their own collections of examples. This book deserves the careful attention of everyone involved in the careful reading of biblical narrative.