

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 22

Introducing Genres and Reading Bible Stories Like Fiction

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Summary

In the past few episodes of the podcast series on learning how to really study your Bible, I've focused on the issue of how critical it is to take the Bible in its own context, not a context that is familiar to us, like modern evangelicalism or the Reformation. I want to transition now to another important area of study: learning to read the Bible in terms of the various types of literature found in its pages.

In this episode, we'll talk about how to read narrative intelligently. I recommend reading it like fiction — like you would read a novel. The problem is that we read the Bible like we read a textbook. That kills inquisitiveness. Read it like a novel; read it like the writer had an agenda or a plan — because he did.

Transcript

Welcome back to the Naked Bible Podcast.

In the past few episodes of the podcast series on learning how to really study your Bible (instead of just *reading* it), I've focused on the issue of how critical it is to take the Bible in its own context, not a context that is familiar to us, like modern evangelicalism or the Reformation. I want to transition now to another important area of real Bible study: learning to read the Bible in terms of the various types of literature found in its pages.

In academic biblical study, thinking about the type of literature means studying the various *genres* of literature. A genre of literature can be simply understood as a *kind* or *type* of literature. You may not have thought consciously about this, but you already know intuitively that there are many different kinds of literature—or, if you prefer, many different kinds of documents or texts. Each of them brings with it certain expectations about what you would normally find in that type and what you wouldn't. For example, think of all the different types of writing you might run into in the course of a day: a letter, a comic book, a newspaper, maybe a legal brief or summons, a blog post, a bill, an invitation to some event, maybe a sales sign or billboard, a bus schedule, a book, a sales receipt, a menu...

Each one of those, in fact, can be broken down into subcategories. Let's take the sale sign. You could have a sign for a house sale, a yard sale, a garage sale, an estate sale, maybe a sale for clothing or a car, and on and on. As I said at the outset, each one of those brings with it certain expectations. If these expectations aren't met about what you expect to find in that piece of writing, you might think whoever created the document (or sign or whatever) was incompetent. Or you might think maybe they were simply trying to draw your attention by violating the expected conventions of that piece of writing.

For example, you wouldn't expect to see a description of a burger and fries in a court summons. And if your lawyer did something like that when he or she presented you with the will you asked for and paid for, you'd immediately know you needed a better lawyer! If someone who sent you a wedding invitation didn't include the time or the place, you'd wonder about the competence of whoever wrote that. In another example, we'd find it irritating if, when we were preparing an account for business expenditures for which we expected to get reimbursed by our company, some of the receipts didn't include the date. Any accountant worth his or her salary would catch that and disqualify it as an expense. On the other hand, if we were flipping through a novel at a bookstore and noticed that it had a bibliography (something pretty atypical for fiction), that might catch our attention and probably lead us to conclude that the author paid a great deal of attention to historical or scientific accuracy in the course of writing his or her fiction. Examples like that can be multiplied many times over.

What I want you to do over the course of the next few episodes is to get you to consider that knowing and understanding the type of literature you're reading within the Bible (and there are many that appear) is important for interpretation. Discovering what you're dealing with in a type of literature will tune your mind to think about the text in a different and a focused way. You'd surely need the right mindset to interpret a legal document, for example, as opposed to a comic book. The latter requires you to suspend your disbelief, and the former demands an attention to detail and a conscious need for defining terms in the legal world—the world of the author. Your mind, essentially, braces itself to work a certain way when it knows what you're looking at.

5:00

I want to start with one of the most frequent literary genres or types in the Bible, and that is narrative. Perhaps it's better grasped as "story-telling." Narrative would include nearly all of the Old Testament, except what is known as Wisdom Literature or Poetry. That is most of Genesis through 2 Chronicles (using the English order of the books). Even the biblical prophets also have a lot of narrative material in them. In the New Testament, we have the Gospels and Acts. They're largely narrative. All of that adds up to being better than half of the Bible as a story—it's storytelling, it's narrative.

Believe it or not, there is a way to read a story intelligently. My recommendation (I've said this many times in lectures and what-not). If it's a Christian audience, they usually look at me and someone will recoil in horror as I say this, but I really

mean it. My advice is that you read the Bible's narratives like they're fiction—just like you would read a novel. I don't mean to say that the content is fictional, although that happens. Rather, if you read narrative like it's a novel, your mind is immediately tuned in a way that will aid you in observing things in the text intelligently. When we read a novel, for instance, we have an intuitive sense that the author of the material (the fiction, the story) is trying to *do* something to us—maybe misdirect us at times, or to embed some word or some scene or some character in our brains—that we somehow know that we need to follow. We need to look for them again. We expect that item to reappear or to get repurposed elsewhere in the material as a vehicle for telling the story.

Fiction writers like to say that they're helped in their writing technique by reading fiction closely. What they mean by that is they try and discern what the writer that they're reading is doing to them and how they're accomplishing it. In academic study of literature, this is called "close reading." Close reading involves (paraphrasing some writers I've read on this topic) putting every word and phrase on trial—seeking to understand why a writer chose *that* word instead of another one, why a writer *repeats* certain words and phrases in a dialogue, perhaps. Or discerning which words in a sentence can have double meaning and then pondering whether there was intent in that word choice. In short, you have to read evaluatively, trying to guess what's being done to you by the seemingly minor decisions in word choice that a writer makes, or by the seemingly minor decisions in the way a character gets described (which means, by the way, looking at what is said by a character and what isn't—what's withheld). We do this unconsciously, to some extent, when reading a novel. We store things away mentally, expecting that a person or a thing or a place has importance for plot and messaging.

You might also think about this using television, especially crime dramas or maybe movies or motion picture dramas as a template. You know when you're sitting there watching whatever it is you're watching, that the director (whoever put this thing together) had only a defined period of time to tell the story. So you have a sense that every character in the story that isn't just somebody walking around in the background is put in front of your eyes for a reason. They must have some role to play. And so what they do or say when they're on the screen has importance for either propelling the story or solving a riddle or finding some resolution in the plot line.

I especially like the Sherlock Holmes movies and the recent BBC remake called *Sherlock* for this illustration. I've read all the Sherlock Holmes stories in book form, so I was sort of tuned in automatically to what was going on in the movies and then in the new series. But I like it because it really makes the point well. If you're watching one of these or if you read a Sherlock Holmes story (or any detective novel, but I especially recommend *Sherlock*), when you finally get the resolution to what Sherlock has been investigating and the important components of the scenes are played back for you (in the case of the films or TV), you can see that everything you needed to know was hidden there in plain

10:00

sight. You actually *saw* all of it. Sherlock, as he himself says, isn't *guessing*. He's *seeing*. Our eyes just aren't as trained as his. We also lack his heightened ability to ask questions about what he sees and then make intelligent deductions. That's all he does! And if you watch these films or the movie, you'll see that everything you needed to get to his conclusion... you were shown all that stuff. But you weren't used to doing two things that you need the most. You weren't used to seeing and asking the right questions.

That's what we need to do when we read biblical narrative. We need to do two things: we need to see the text, and then we need to ask questions about what we see. Reading biblical narrative as fiction is the way to begin this. It's a way to begin the process, since our brains are more accustomed to searching the pages of a novel with the thought that the writer is up to something than when we read something else. The problem is that we read the Bible like we read textbooks, and that just kills inquisitiveness. Read the biblical narratives like a novel. Read it like the writer had an agenda or a plan, because he *did*.

By way of a suggestion list for seeing the text, here are some things you might look for:

- **Symbolism.** Words that are used that you sort of intuitively either know or you have to wonder, "Am I to take this at face value, literally, or some other way?" And then you want to start tracing, following that bread crumb elsewhere in the biblical text—especially within that story.
- **Repeated images, words, or ideas.** Look for words or phrases that jump out as important. They come at a critical point in the story.
- **Words or phrases that can be interpreted in more than one way,** either in terms of deliberate ambiguity or irony. You might want to look for figurative language. Or look at the characters and the roles they play in the story.

You do all this with fiction intuitively. You don't even have to think about it; it's a reflex. What I'm suggesting is you take that mindset—that brain setting—with you when you approach narrative in the Bible.

By way of illustrating how much can be gained from this method, I want to read from chapter 6 of a book by an expert in biblical narrative and its analysis. The book is by Shimon Bar-Ephrat and is entitled [Narrative Art in the Bible](#). I'll put a link to it under the "Bibliography" tab at www.nakedbiblepodcast.com. Be advised that it's a scholarly book, but frankly, there's really nothing better for this.

Our example comes from the first two verses of 2 Samuel 13, which is the tragic story of Amnon's rape of Tamar. I'd recommend opening your Bible right now (or later if you can't and then listening to this part again). But open your Bible and then read the whole chapter—2 Samuel 13. If you're really ambitious, read the

next two chapters of the extended story—the fallout. Then come back to these first two verses in the chapter (2 Samuel 13:1-2) and listen to this part of the podcast again. But for the sake of the podcast, just follow along. The first two verses say this:

¹ Now Absalom, David's son, had a beautiful sister, whose name was Tamar; and after a time Amnon, David's son, loved her. ² And Amnon was so tormented that he made himself ill because of his sister Tamar; for she was a virgin, and it seemed impossible to Amnon to do anything to her.

That doesn't seem like much is going on. But now listen to what Ephrat sees—or how he thinks about what he sees (what we've just read):

15:00

The narrative begins with an exposition in which the characters are introduced. We're told four things about the protagonists: their names (Absalom, Tamar, and Amnon), their family relations (David's son, sister, and again, David's son in the order of the characters). Third, we're told about Tamar's external appearance (she's beautiful). And lastly, we're told about Amnon's feelings about Tamar. He loved her. All these four features are crucially important for the narrative. The names are needed, of course, so that it will be possible to identify the characters in the narrative. The family ties between the individuals are important because they constitute the basis of the imbroglia on which the narrative stands. Tamar's beauty is undoubtedly the reason for Amnon's love for her, which in turn provides the motive for all that follows. Thus, everything in the exposition is essential for understanding the narrative.

The structure of the first verse should be given some attention. The same information about the characters could have been conveyed by constructing the verse differently. For example, it could have read this way, "Now Amnon, David's son, loved Tamar, Absalom's sister, who was very beautiful." Although virtually the same information is conveyed here as in the biblical verse, there are fine differences, which are significant. The biblical verse is built in such a way that, in addition to communicating information about the characters, it also hints about what is to come. For instance, Absalom (David's son) is mentioned at the beginning of the verse. This is surprising because he plays only a minor role, and only then at the conclusion of the whole chapter. It would have seemed sufficient to have introduced him *then*, stating his relation to Tamar. In any case, it's remarkable that *he*, rather than one of the principle characters (either Amnon or Tamar) is given a prominent position at the beginning of the first verse. It would seem that he's cited here because of the central role he is to fulfill in the later developments following Amnon's rape of Tamar. This means that even though the narrative of Amnon and Tamar can be regarded as a separate and complete literary unit, the opening

verse indicates that it only serves as a prologue or a first stage in the chain of narrative units that are to follow. The real point is going to be Absalom.

Absalom, David's son, opens the verse and Amnon, David's son, closes it. While Tamar is in the middle between the two brothers. This structure reflects the situation which is to arise in the future when these two sons of David will confront one another and Tamar will be the cause of the dissention and disharmony between them much later in the story. There's nothing in the verse to indicate that the friction between the two brothers is the result of a conflict of political interest between them—namely, rivalry over the succession—since David is not referred to as "the king" in this verse. Had he been referred to as the king in the first verse, then you'd get a hint of a political rivalry. Rather, what you're going to get is a table setting, a main event that will cause the tension between these two. The tension between Absalom and Amnon is based on family ties. Tamar is the axis, and her two brothers are at the opposing poles.

Now, in contrast to Absalom and Amnon (each of whom is defined as "David's son"), Tamar is called "Absalom's sister" and not "David's daughter." This should be regarded as intimating that she and Absalom have the same mother, even though further on in the narrative she is also called "Amnon's sister" by all the characters (David, Amnon, Absalom, and Tamar herself), including the narrator. The reference to her as Absalom's sister is appropriate to what happens later when Absalom, rather than David, acts on her behalf and avenges her humiliation.

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What we learn from Ephrat's reading is what to see and what to ask about what we see. We see the characters, but did we think to ask why they're in the order they're presented in? In the Old Testament, order like this (a sequence) can be telling—especially with respect to birth order or wife order or child order. The orders are not accidental or careless. They convey something about pecking order in the house or the dynasty, or preferential disposition of a parent or a king, or rank and influence, on and on. That is, a simple detail like order reveals other details of family dynamics and even ruling dynamics. Further, would we have thought to ask why Tamar is characterized with the word "sister" instead of "David's daughter?" Would we wonder as we read the story why Absalom just disappears after the first verse? Apparently, he's a pointless reference—until the outcome of the story in 2 Samuel 13 and beyond! After seeing the outcome (that David did nothing about the situation except get mad, while Absalom punished the guilty), would that have made us realize that the whole episode is in some way propelling the larger story of Absalom—his antipathy toward David, his father, and his motive for stealing David's kingdom later? I don't know. But if we're thinking like we're reading fiction, we would have these sorts of things floating around in our heads. "I wonder why I'm reading this *here* instead of somewhere else. I wonder why the writer chose *this* word instead of *that* one. I wonder why the writer told me *this* but didn't tell me some other things that I

would think he should have told me, or that would sort of go here. Why the omissions?"

That's how to read a story intelligently. Again, we do it intuitively when we read fiction. That's why I recommend you read biblical narrative like it's a novel. You might think, "Boy, this is a lot of work!" Well, are you here to study the Bible or just read it and forget it? Sure it's work! But as my favorite quotation about biblical studies says, "The tasks of scholars are not for sissies." We all have to start someplace. You'll get more out of biblical stories if you begin to read them like fiction, training your mind to think that the author is up to something, that it's all deliberate—because it is.