

How to Read Old Testament Narratives: The Book of Genesis as a Case Study

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Imagine that you are channel surfing. You come across a movie. It looks interesting. You check the channel guide, and you discover that it's already been running for an hour and it has another hour to run. You watch the movie for a few more minutes, but you notice that it will be replayed later in the week so you decide to move to another channel. You plan to watch the whole movie from beginning to end when it is shown again.

The next day, your friend, who watched the whole movie, happens to ask you what you thought of a particular scene, which turns out to be the one five-minute scene that you happened to watch the previous night. What to do? Well, you could pontificate about the meaning of the scene. You saw the whole scene after all. You could even talk about how deeply it affected you and how it's made you think differently about approaching some problem in your life. Or, you could say, "I'll need to see that scene in the context of the whole movie before I can comment intelligently."

Do you see the point I'm making? You can make sense of a part of a story seen or read by itself, but you can make better sense of it in the context of the whole story in which it is embedded.

As you look at lots of parts of the story of Genesis, I want to encourage you to interpret the parts in the context of the whole story. But which "whole story"? Well, obviously the whole story of Genesis, but also the whole story of redemption from its beginning in Genesis 1:1 to its end in the final verses of Revelation. Always remember that your passages are not short stories in an anthology of unconnected short stories, but parts of one large narrative (the metanarrative – the great narrative – of redemption).

Now back to my movie illustration. So the movie comes on, you watch the whole thing from beginning to end. You make sense of each scene in the context of every preceding scene (in other words, you are paying attention to the plot). Everything is holding together well; it all makes good sense. That's the way we watch a movie or read a book for the first time (what I call a "first reading"): it's reading towards an unknown conclusion, reading without the benefit of the conclusion, reading a text in the context of the story as far as it has unfolded.

Now imagine that the movie is being replayed (yet again!) the following night and you decide to watch the whole thing again. Now the movie holds together in a different

way, some scenes might have a different meaning or carry a different nuance than they did the previous night. Why? Because this time you already know the ending, you watch the movie with the knowledge of where it is heading. Scenes and information that you thought were insignificant on the first viewing might become more significant or significant in a different way because now you are engaging in a “second reading” (or in this case, a second watching).

You are reading the story already knowing how it will end. And often a movie watched, or a book read, for the second time is a richer experience because you now more fully understand the parts in terms of the director’s (or author’s) intentions.

Now imagine that the movie you have been watching and re-watching has been *The Sixth Sense*, or any movie with a surprise ending. Movies and books with surprise endings beg to be re-watched, re-read and reinterpreted. In a second reading the pieces of the story really do hold together in a new and richer way. A mystery novel reread for the second time will constantly elicit responses like: “Now I get it,” “Oh, I didn’t see that,” “Now I see what the author was doing,” “Hmm, that information was much more important than I first thought,” and so on.

It’s not that your first interpretation (reading or watching) was wrong. It’s just that with the knowledge of the whole story, and especially the surprise ending, the pieces hold together in a different way.

So why am I giving you this long illustration? To help you think about how you should read the Old Testament in general and Genesis in particular. Put simply, I want to suggest that you engage in two readings of Genesis. One is a first reading: Genesis on its own terms. Genesis as its own unfolding story, but also Genesis read as the first part of an even longer unfolding story. Genesis as an Israelite book, and not (yet) a Christian book!

The other way of reading is a second reading: reading Genesis in the light of the larger story’s surprise ending in the gospel – the story of the life, death, resurrection, exaltation of Jesus and his creation of a new people of God through the outpouring of the Spirit. I want to contend that a Christian reading of the Old Testament is, above all, a second reading. It’s a reading where you come back and make sense of the various scenes in Genesis, now with the knowledge that the story of Jesus (and his people) and not the story of Israel is the true, albeit unexpected, climax of the grand narrative in which Adam, Abraham, Jacob and Joseph (for example) play such important roles.

In other words, you let the Jesus-ending of Israel's story reshape the way you interpret the particular passage you are dealing with. This is the way you read Genesis as a Christian book.