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Narrative Critique and the Covenant in Genesis 15

How does a narrative explain? For the grammatical-historical critic, the narrative is only a part, and a lesser part at that, of the real meaning derived from a methodological admixture of philology, archaeology, and historical studies.¹ It could be argued that the entire European Enlightenment came to hermeneutical fruition in some versions of grammatical-historical criticism of biblical texts.² But these do not yield explanations *from story*, rather an analysis of philology, archaeology, and history *that occasions the story*.

Vern Poythress gives us ample reasons as Evangelicals to use the tools of grammatical-historical criticism with extreme prejudice.³ He stresses the inadequacy of linguistic analysis to discern semantic domain within a text (re grammatical criticism). Also skeptical of historical analysis, Poythress doubts its ability to procure the nuance of an unfolding covenantal relationship in a text (re historical criticism).

To skirt the sting of Poythress' critique, we turn to an analysis of the narrative in final form rather than a grammatical-historical approach.⁴ This essay will seek to show that the narrative analysis of the covenant within Genesis 15 captures what grammatical-historical analysis may fail to arrest. To do this, we will first look at the historical roots of narrative critique with an appraisal of its working parts. This essay will then use narrative criticism to analyze the story of covenant within Genesis 15 and its literary horizons into the text of

¹ As an example, David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell rebut E.A. Speiser's Anchor Bible Commentary on Genesis 4 saying, "Speiser's, then, is an interpretation perhaps more interesting for what it fails to say than what it says. Comparative philology offers a useful strategy for constructing a reading that says nothing about possible theological issues or themes (e.g. theodicy, sin, and judgement), nothing about the individual characters and their intentions or emotions, nothing even about Speiser's own claim that the story really depicts a social rather than individual conflict. Still, we do learn that in Akkadian dogs 'have experience of' other dogs." *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1993), 20.

² Vern Poythress presents 'grammatical-historical' and all of its 'subtraditions' as well as one monolithic movement. For the history of critical interpretation, these would refer to Gabler, Strauss, Troeltsh, et al and all projects that attempt to explore and extrapolate the New Testament texts by 'scientific' means alone. "Our Notion of Grammatical-Historical Interpretation" in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (March 2007), 87-103.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Yet, I am not convinced that these grammatical-historical tools are entirely absent in the foreground or background of the narrative analysis. But, the degree to which narrative is *discoverable* with these tools will follow below.

Genesis. Finally, we will assess the ability of narrative criticism to hermeneutically guide us along with its possible deficiencies and points of concern.

A Brief History of Narrative Critique

David Rhoads traces the origin of Narrative Criticism (NC) to a bible class in 1977 where he invites a literature professor (Donald Michie) to lecture on the bible *as literature*.⁵ Although there was always some modicum of folk narrative criticism alive in the church throughout the millennia, this magical moment in 1977 is also noted by Mark Allan Powell as the moment that literary criticism and biblical interpretation gestated to later become narrative criticism. And although this was the genesis that bore the publication of *Mark as Story*, the view of *scripture as narrative* did not leap into a vacuous space of biblical criticism. What was the lacuna within which narrative criticism broached?

Hans Frei goes to great effort to show that the general sense of reading scripture as *story qua story* was existent before, but lost on the Enlightenment. In the opening chapters of *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, Frei uses the Reformers, Spinoza, and Cocceius (among others) as archetypes of precritical interpretation. Their interpretation mirrors narrative criticism at points where careful attention was paid between the figurative and literal senses that drove the derivation of meaning from the narrative.⁶

No doubt, one would not have to read these figures at length to gather their esteem for the *story qua story* and *story as a narrative that transcends* to speak authoritatively into their current affairs.⁷

⁵ David Rhoads & Donald Michie, *Mark As Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1982) preface.

⁶ Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974), 17-50.

⁷ As an instance, Calvin's sermons on Deuteronomy 15 and Matthew 25 regard the *story of the poor* as one seamless plight from Moses' generation to Jesus' to Calvin's own consideration as how best to structure the deaconate in order to fulfill Christian duty to the poor of Geneva. This larger narrative of the poor becomes important to discerning the individual dictates within the story of the Israelites. It also becomes of crucial importance in understanding the severity of Jesus' words in Matthew 25 (re the very elements that drive the plot forward). Pursuant to such a reading, the implications for people who feel that they too are bound to the larger narrative then *trajects* through the scriptures into their current history as well. The larger narrative context not only helps in understanding historical background, but also in the tone of the story, the movement of the plot and the incorporation of transcendent characters in the analysis, so that Calvin himself becomes an active character in the *trajected* narrative. This guides both his understanding of the story itself and the formation of his theology, to include other transcendent characters (re the poor who were alive in Calvin's generation). Bonnie Pattison, *Poverty in the Theology of John Calvin*, (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2006).

For instance, Calvin's readings of scripture, among many in the precritical era, appear to be guided by some fundamental concerns of narrative criticism: "close reading" and "unity and coherence of the text". Although James Resseguie lists these two vantages as gifts inherited by narrative criticism from the *New Criticism*, we see them as foundational in the analysis of precritical Reformers and others well before that famed classroom in 1977. Even the third category that Resseguie adds as the distinguishing mark of narrative criticism, reader-response analysis, appears presupposed and becomes an extreme extension of reader-response in Calvin's orthopraxy.⁸

All this to say that there is copious evidence of a precritical analysis of narrative itself, even if we flatten Calvin's view of scripture as an intertextual meta-narrative that reaches back to the Bronze Age and forward to the 21st Century. The fundamental value of the narrative is present in precritical thinking. The question for Frei is, "What happened to that understanding during the Enlightenment?" The short answer appears to be one of revolutionary interpretation in the Kuhnian sense.⁹ As the growth of Kant's reaction to Descartes, Locke and Hume rises across Europe, the appetite to domesticate physics within metaphysics swelled. Methodological reductionism seemed to proliferate both our understanding and technology in the physical sciences. There was seemingly no good reason why the social sciences and humanities could not benefit likewise.

Further, if metaphysics were as Kant suggested (re fundamentally graspable), the best outcome scholars could ascend to would be a rigorous and metaphysically based reduction of all experience bound to the necessary *a priori* truths. This would come to include historical truths and thus, the history of religion, theology, and the authority of transmission itself. Nothing was

⁸ Reader Response ideals find some definitive boundaries in people who both read a text and feel bound to practice the implications that they draw from the text. "To be sure, reader response criticism generally tends, more than other brands of literary criticism, to grant value to *all* reading, whether expert or naïve." Robert M. Fowler, "Who is 'The Reader' in Reader Response Criticism?" in *Beyond Form Criticism: Essays in Old Testament Literary Criticism*, Ed. Paul R. House (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 376.

⁹ Lacking the foundational epistemology that Polanyi provided him and no ability to adjudicate between epistemologies, Kuhn describes 'revolutionary science' as that which gains the power to explain incommensurably against the paradigms of normal science. However, in this instance, Kantian metaphysics (hence epistemology) act as the revolutionary paradigm that appears to supervene in the paradigm shift due to its ability to explain more powerfully. Unfortunately, the idea that Kant offers a 'more powerful' paradigm of explanation is tainted by the ethic inherent to epistemology, in that what we value dictates what we can know. So if we value having indubitably and a rigorous deductive system of logical explanation, then of course, Kantian metaphysics must become our revolutionary paradigm, and subsequent normal paradigm. See Thomas Kuhn *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* and Michael Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge*.

excluded from the Kantian purview and now we see the ‘eclipse of biblical narrative’ as the natural result of critical analysis finding its critical mass within biblical interpretation.

In the post-Kant world, there was little room for appreciation of something as *soft* and *miry* as a narrative that organizes propositions in a manner that cannot be understood merely as propositional truths (or analytic/synthetic truths for Kant). Outside of a few inimitable but scant voices, Kant’s metaphysic and method marches through the history, philology, and theology departments of Western Europe.¹⁰

What turns the tide? Norman Peterson is hesitant to put dates and events on the turn away from ‘literature criticisms’ (re form-historical-source criticism), but cites the English-speaking reception of Satre’s existential-phenomenological critique as one nail in the coffin of those philological critiques.¹¹

Hans Frei credits the *Romanticist turn* that is exemplified by Schleiermacher, the seminal figure to turn away from *text as data-object*.¹² Ensuing figures like Gadamer and Barth turn theology away from ‘texts *qua* myth *qua* compilations of historical datum’ as well. Barth and others were approaching NT texts as generated from an historical event (i.e. the incarnation), but revealing a particularized story to the reader through the guide (i.e. written text).¹³

But Peterson specifically notes that these disparate criticisms had wed themselves to a singular foundation: philology. Here is how he describes the shift from grammatical-historical to literary criticism:

Philology holds the code books on the basis of which our texts were both encoded and decoded, and by which alone decoding becomes a possibility for us. Our new criticism has to go beyond philology; but, it cannot do so without it. A literary reading of a narrative text thus begins at the moment when we allow ourselves to be addressed by

¹⁰ Re Hamann, Beck, Hofmann, Kähler, Schlatter, Barth, Cullman, and even the likes of Schleiermacher and Friedrich Nietzsche.

¹¹ Norman R. Peterson “Literary Criticism in Biblical Studies” in *Orientation by Disorientation: Studies in Literary Criticism and Biblical Literary Criticism*. Ed. Richard A. Spencer (Pittsburg, PA: Pickwick Press, 1980), 2-42.

¹² Paul Thorsell argues that it is a mistake to argue, as Nancy Murphy does, that Schleiermacher is reacting to Enlightenment modernism, and thus, prefigures Post-Modernism. He does so by showing evidence for Schleiermacher being a seminal theologian of Romanticism. Either way, Schleiermacher’s work creates dissonance between Kantian sensibilities and some other option for theology. “Is Schleiermacher also among the Post-modernists? Schleiermacher’s Romantic Theology and the Rejection of Modernity”, presented at *Evangelical Theological Society Annual Conference*, Washington D.C., November 16, 2006.

¹³ Karl Barth’s centralizing statement manifests this well where he says, “According to Holy Scripture God’s revelation takes place in the fact that God’s Word became a man and that this man has become God’s Word. The incarnation of the eternal Word, Jesus Christ, is God’s revelation. In the reality of this event God proves that he is free to be our God.” *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, 1.

its textually immanent narrator. That is the first step. All others follow from it. For from that moment on we become participants not only in the form of the work but also in the formation of the work and of the imaginative world associated with it.¹⁴

In stressing the dependence of these criticisms on the ‘code book’ of philology, Peterson reveals both the historical shift but also the egress route from ‘literature criticisms’ to ‘narrative criticism’: humility. One must recognize the author and find oneself within the narrative space of that author’s imagination. For Peterson, the new criticism that finds liberty from the scientific constraints of philology will begin by recognizing we are ‘participants’ in ‘the imaginative world’ of the author. This effectively weds the concepts of ‘coherent unity’ and ‘close reading’ to ‘entering the text’ through humility. David M Gunn sees the same trend in OT studies and a similar shift in the field.¹⁵

On a the dogmatic-theological front, Barth’s maximization of the incarnation as a transcendent God-event and Schleiermacher’s maximization of our god-consciousness experience leaves little room for a third option, namely the maximization of Kantian critique and *Lessingian* history. The loss of philology’s ability to inhere meaning upon analysis and the theological/philosophical shift away from modern and positivist explanations left one door open for new forms of criticism and one door quickly closing on the philologically constrained criticisms.

Certainly we can see that the mental furniture of the Western mind has to be made ready for a view of narrative being worth a thoroughgoing critique; i.e. that meaning could convene on or through the narrative itself. Although the precritical analysis of narrative appears to esteem some principles of narrative criticism, that esteem was lost in the long shadow of the Enlightenment. Upon the collapse of modernistic critiques of the scripture as myth, archeology, or the object of philological analysis in the 1950’s, the door is left open for burgeoning sensibilities of history, phenomenology, and narrative to explain the texts themselves. The malaise around the end of modernism leaves scholarship yearning for new alternatives in all

¹⁴ Norman R. Peterson “Literary Criticism in Biblical Studies”, 38.

¹⁵ “For two hundred years western biblical criticism has been concerned with the question of historicity (the history of Israel) and with the history of biblical literature. The two ran hand in glove, for without the one the other could not be written. Despite some spectacular successes, the major failure of both programs is now becoming obvious.” And, “My view is that, practically speaking in the doing of major varieties of literary criticism, historical critical inquiry does not make much contribution. It is not necessarily that it is wrong. It is just that it is going somewhere else.” “New Directions in the Study of Biblical Hebrew Narrative” in *Beyond Form Criticism: Essays in Old Testament Literary Criticism*, Ed. Paul R. House (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 413 & 419.

areas of understanding. Thus, we can now see David Rhoads' genesis of narrative criticism in 1977 nested within the story of the rise of *story* (or increased value). Or as Hans Frei may correct us, the eclipse of precritical narrative understanding is now ready to be revealed under the light of romanticist, phenomenological and literary sensibilities coming to the fore as Modernism wanes in the twentieth century.

Primary Functions of Narrative Criticism

What is narrative criticism and how does it differ from other literary and philological criticisms? Powell answers this question based on what critical perspective is most valued, whether the author's rhetoric, the original reader, the implied reader, the reaction of a reader, or even the elements that may evince particular responses of readers. The critical perspective that is valued determines the critical apparatus used to examine. What is important for Powell is to distinguish narrative criticism in two ways. First, narrative criticism is a subset of reader-response criticism, thus divergent from *New Criticism*. And second, narrative criticism is distinguishable clearly against structuralism, which looks at the latent composition of the linguistics and also rhetorical criticism that analyzes the argument form and intentions of the author.

Further, Powell distinguishes narrative criticism as a subset of relativistic deconstructions or mere experiential readings of texts. But, Resseguie offers a more utilitarian taxonomy, essentially proposing a view of narrative criticism as *New Criticism* + reader-response criticism.¹⁶ First, narrative criticism borrows from *New Criticism* in that it advocates the unity of a text and the coherence of a unified narrative. Second, it also commandeers the notion of "close reading" that attempts to detect nuance through careful reading of the plot, whether seeing characters as integral or plot as an organizing form within which the characters fall.

Third, and differentiating itself from *New Criticism*, narrative criticism takes the response of the reader as integral to the narrative. This is what Resseguie takes to be the fundamental reason that *New Criticism* failed: it viewed the reader as irrelevant. And although narrative criticism embraces the reader, the reader becomes a very point of dispute within the

¹⁶ James L. Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 22-25.

field.¹⁷ Specifically, what must one presume about the reader from the narrative? While narratives may imply a reader, what sort of reader? Should we analyze a narrative on the presumption that the author had an ideal reader or that *any* reader could be equally motivated by the rhetoric of the story?

Following Resseguie's breakdown, he notes that Powell advocates a sense of an implied reader as 'ideal reader': a non-historical person envisioned by the implied author.¹⁸ Dean Kingsbury expands this description to include a reader who can draw upon all the proper knowledge and emotions demanded by every point of the narrative (e.g. to be the weeping mother of Lazarus, to have the knowledge of internally consistent plot, etc.).¹⁹ Others will approach the reader as one who must fill in the *lacunae* rendered by the story itself and/or construct the narrative alone or in community (re Iser and Fish versions of readers). At this point, it is sufficient to note that whatever version of a reader we bear onto or into the text, it must have some affect on our 'close reading'.

But as Powell is interested in holding up narrative criticism as an exemplary model²⁰, this also begs the question as to what narrative criticism values? What does narrative criticism take seriously where the other analyses fail? The presumption appears to be that narrative has an ability to yield meaning that transcends the historical, phenomenal, and propositional boundaries.²¹ This ability of the narrative leads many to look at the elements of the narrative as a sort of correspondent reality, acting as a nexus between the world of the story and the world of the reader.

Again, what are these elements? As Powell focuses his discussion on the purview of narrative criticism, we become aware of what is valued in this hermeneutic. For narrative criticism, the interaction of the author and reader²² is scrutinized through: 1) the disposition advocated by the story, 2) the use of the narrator that binds the reader and narrator into a

¹⁷ See Robert M. Fowler article for a discussion on the problems and directions taken concerning the definition of the reader. "Who is 'The Reader' in Reader Response Criticism?", 381-93.

¹⁸ Mark Allan Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990), 19.

¹⁹ Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism in the New Testament*, 32.

²⁰ Mark Allan Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990), 16-21.

²¹ Powell explicitly states this presumption later.

²² Refer back to discussion of *reader types*.

fiduciary relationship, 3) symbolism and metaphorical intent, and 4) patterns pervasive in the story.²³

In all these focal lenses, we see a discrete interest in the rhetoric, the structure and the response or possible responses of the reader. There can be minimal versions as well. In his seminal work, David Rhoads only identifies two considerations: the content and form (i.e. story & rhetoric).²⁴ Again, what makes this a unique criticism in the history of criticisms is that it restricts itself to content and form *within the world of a particular narrative*.

Analysis of Genesis 15

Having considered the historical roots of narrative criticism and its distinguishing values, we now turn to the narrative itself. In order to display the merits of this criticism, we will need to demonstrate how it approaches a text and measure that approach to grammatical-historical approaches. We will only discuss the narrative of Genesis 15 at the sufficient depth required to showcase narrative criticism in the Pentateuch and possible points of deficiency.

In Genesis chapter 15, we see an episode within a series of episodes where Abram is called and commissioned by YHWH (chapters 12-17). These divine dialogue scenes are interspersed in sequences that include scenes of nomadic movement, battles, royal disputes, infidelity, rescues, and Amorite cultic activities (re King of Salem). All of these activities appear to be directly related to Abram's new and fiduciary relationship with YHWH. The actions of Abram and his family (re Lot) drive the story forward to what is clearly central to the narrative, which is the fulfillment of the initial promises of Genesis 12: 1-3.

Genesis 15, within the broader story of Abram's developing relationship, moves quickly to one facet of the initial promises: the land. The 'larger' problem of Abram's heir is dealt with in the opening verses of the chapter.²⁵ Now, due to the current iteration of the land promise, Abram flinches and directly confronts YHWH with an epistemological demand. "O Lord God, How am I to know that I shall possess it (15:8)?"

²³ Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?* 23-34.

²⁴ Rhoads & Michie, *Mark as Story*, 4.

²⁵ "And he brought him outside and said, 'Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.' And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness." Genesis 15:5-6.

Grammatical-Historical Approach to Genesis 15

Even in our conversation about the text to this point, we have already revealed a value for the two inherited aspects of narrative criticism: unity and coherence of the text and ‘close reading’. But this is not only to the advantage of narrative criticism. Franz Delitzsch opens his analysis of Genesis 15 by acknowledging the probable unity of the entire chapter despite the efforts of some source criticism.²⁶ But again, Delitzsch’s reasons for ascribing unity are due to particularized uses of YHWH and *Elohim* under the documentary hypothesis.

Further, and emphasizing the values of grammatical-historical criticism, Delitzsch knits together a discussion that mainly detects and compares what is philologically primary and peculiar to the text.²⁷ He also includes a free-ranging commentary that interjects explicitly Christian theological appraisal as well as personal insights. But these are not based upon the narrative, but rather Delitzsch’s larger and disjointed exegetical project. For example, Delitzsch has an extended anachronistic examination of covenantal rites and imputed righteousness based largely upon Pauline theology.²⁸ He also offers insightful comments that may or may not be perspicacious, but the point here is that they certainly are *not* derivative treatments of the narrative.²⁹

But what is important for the purposes of contrast is that Delitzsch represents the grammatical-historical approach inasmuch as he does not center his criticism on the story itself.³⁰ This, in turn, yields exploration that may miss the central concerns of the narrative, which is what intends to organize the text into Delitzsch’s previously acknowledged coherent unity. Indeed, Delitzsch often relegates key plot features of the story to philological and/or geographical analysis.³¹ While Delitzsch offers a forensic view of a covenant with comparative

²⁶ Franz Delitzsch, *A New Commentary on Genesis: Volume 2* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2001), 1-2.

²⁷ See Delitzsch’s discussion concerning the people in the breadth of the land (e.g. primary) or his etymological discourse that connects the Hebrew term for torch to a ‘cylindrical object’ (e.g. peculiar). Franz Delitzsch, *A New Commentary on Genesis: Volume 2*, 11-12.

²⁸ Franz Delitzsch, *A New Commentary on Genesis: Volume 2*, 7-8.

²⁹ “After everything earthly has been rendered invisible to him, God lights up the future....” . Franz Delitzsch, *A New Commentary on Genesis: Volume 2*, 9.

³⁰ We are not just picking on Delitzsch’s work alone. But here, his work is representative of wider grammatical-historical criticism. We could equally convince the reader of the same with Speiser’s commentary on Genesis and even Von Rad’s to some extent. See E.A. Speiser, *The Anchor Bible: Genesis* (New York, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1964) and Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, Translated by John H. Marks (London: SCM Press, 1961).

³¹ E.g. Delitzsch’s discussion of the people groups mentioned fails to account for the larger narrative framework of Genesis and its outworking in Abram’s narrative. Hence, his discussion of the people groups fails to recognize narritival elements of interest; e.g. that these are the descendents of Ham listed in the genealogies of Genesis 10.

analysis, he fails to offer any answers to basic questions that the narrative demands we ask. It is akin to hearing an incomprehensible story about a mutual friend who was arrested for stealing a car and then offering an analysis of the car that was stolen. The story itself demands that certain questions be asked?³² Now we will begin the process of narrative criticism to see what questions we ask and thus determine if the narrative can guide our analysis.

Narrative Critique of Genesis 15

We enter this particular story nested within the ongoing account between Abram and YHWH that begins in Ur and moves through the lands of Haran, Egypt, and Canaan. We will begin by offering an assessment of the story through the setting, characters, and events. We must also examine the questions raised and resolved by the narrative. But to showcase the advantages of narrative criticism, we must specifically look at those questions that remain unresolved within the story. Adopting Powell's process, we will now probe this passage by means of its setting, characters and plot events.

Setting

The three most important setting elements to this passage are: 1) time of day, 2) ceremony, and 3) geography. First, solar tracking indicates the time of day. Abram's lack of progeny at the fore of this passage is epistemically rectified when God brings Abram from his vision to the outside view of the stars (15:5). The night sky is required in order to make the simile poignant.³³ The next scene indicates that after Abram had finished preparing the slaughtered animals, *the sun was setting* (15:12). Then the revelation of the coming 'Israelite Nation' is ensued by the narrator's note that *the sun had just set* (15:17). This comes directly before the scene of fire going between the pieces of cut animal.

Solar tracking both acts as an indicator of the temporal setting (i.e. time passing in one evening), but also as a break in the action. Whereas Abram was just outside stargazing in verse

This Noachic narrative makes some narrative connection to Ham's actions, the actions of his descendents, and their integral function in the story of the coming Israelites, which is the express concern in the dialogue in Genesis 15: descendents and land. Franz Delitzsch, *A New Commentary on Genesis: Volume 2*, 12.

³² E.g. Why was she stealing a car? What happened to her car? How has her lifestyle come to the point where stealing a car seems like a viable alternative to buying one?

³³ E.g. We could reword verse 5 to read, "The number of your offspring will be like the number of stars you see."

six, the sun has now come up again and is almost setting from verse seven onward. Thus, there appears to be a break in the discourse time between these two events.³⁴

Second, the ceremonial setting also cast light on the social setting. We do not know the exact location, except that it is somewhere in Canaan. We do not know the social setting of this scene, except the scant and mysterious actions of the kings in the area and Abram's different reactions to them.³⁵ What is known is that Abram asks a question and YHWH answers via the ceremony. This ritual was somehow meant to answer that question. This may indicate that this ceremony was a part of the cultic milieu within which Abram was familiar. Or, the rite somehow conveyed divine revelation to Abram that was exclusive or subjective to him. In other words, another person of similar background to Abram could have witnessed the ritual and not have understood its meaning or implications.

The third option is some amalgamation of the above. It could be the case that Abram both understood some elements of the ritual from within his social formation, but in acting peculiarly and particularly in this ritual, YHWH inheres new and exclusive revelation to these elements.³⁶ Whatever the case, the ritual itself definitively makes the reader aware of something particular to this scene, whether the rite is socially isolated or ubiquitous in the time of Abram.

Geography is the third element of the narrative that plays a subversive role. In the foreground, it acts as the promise that evinces Abram's disbelief. In the background it lingers as a monumental promise that becomes elephantine once its full boundaries are revealed. Commentators differ on what is meant by the boundaries and the people groups mentioned. However, a 'close reading' of the preceding narrative will yield a minimally obvious observation, namely that Abram has traveled the breadth of this avowed land from his call out of Ur in the East to Haran in the North to Egypt in the South and now Canaan in the West.

If nothing else, while the issue of heirs is dealt with rather swiftly and ends positively (15:1-7), the extent of this land pledged becomes the background to *the more difficult belief* on

³⁴ Delitzsch posits this 'break' as a reason to view the passage as two distinct narratives, but is assuaged by the documentary hypothesis that maintains a unified view. This unity is due to its use of *Elohim* in both scenes. Franz Delitzsch, *A New Commentary on Genesis: Volume 2*, 1-2.

³⁵ Abram accepts Melchizedek's tithe while refusing offerings from the King of Sodom, 14:17-24.

³⁶ This could be similar to the rite of circumcision that is in use for different purposes in the Ancient Near East well before Abram, but is commandeered and made an exclusively revealed rite upon its inaction within Abrams descendents.

Abram's part. YHWH begins by offering a minimal description: "I give you this land." Once the extent of "this land" is known by the reader *and* related to Abram's own itinerary, his doubt becomes more reasonable, so to speak.

Characters

YHWH and Abram are the flatly unmissable characters of Genesis 15. A more strained character analysis might include Abram's heirs who would surely hear of this event through family lore. It might also include Sarah, Abram's household, and the cut animals could even typologically characterize the *messiah* himself as the realization of YHWH's self-maledictory oath. But Abram's heirs and the animals would be considered extremely *flat* characters.³⁷ Conversely, Abram and YHWH are both *round characters* because they "possess a variety of potentially conflicting traits."³⁸

We do not generally want to speak of God as having 'potentially conflicting traits', but this story line exhibits a god whom is clearly unpredictable. Consider the reaction to Abram's question. "O Lord God, How am I to know that I shall possess it (15:8)?" We could stop at that point and ask ourselves as the reader, "According to the narrative thus far, how will YHWH react to Abram's petition?" Not only is it impossible to envisage YHWH's 'answer', but we would have no substantial literary ground for whatever estimation we offer.

Likewise, we are unsure of Abram's epistemic vector as well. At the head of this passage, Abram is able to reconcile YHWH's seemingly impossible reassurance of progeny through an elementary and celestial object lesson (15:5). Further, the whole epistemic sequence is summarized by a cryptic and oft-analyzed proposition, "And he believed the LORD, and he counted to him as righteousness." Yet, when YHWH continues on to reiterate the promise of land, which was contained within the original promises of chapter twelve, Abram's positive epistemology regresses into a mysteriously funded mistrust of God. As the reader has no substantial prescience to YHWH's reaction in verse nine, we had a similarly dumbfounded reading of Abram's inexplicable and possibly brazen retort to the promise found in verse seven.

For these reasons, we assess that both primary characters are *round characters*. The narrator gives us the roundness of character through 'showing', not 'telling'. The character

³⁷ According to Powell, flat characters are those, "whose traits are all consistent and predictable.", 55.

³⁸ Ibid.

development must be appealed to through actions, not the narrator's assessment, because parts of the assessment appear to be contradicted at points. At the fore, Abram is credited with righteousness only to demand evidence for the same series of promises at the next instance of promise. This does not contradict the narrator's assessment, but forces the reader to pay close attention to the elements of the narrative that drive character development.

Plot Events

Finally, we arrive at the core element of the narrative itself, the progression of plot. There are two promises reiterated here to Abram: heirs and land. Plot progresses forward from a problem that is initially developed.³⁹ The problem in this narrative is Abram's *unbelief* in the veridicality of the second promise.⁴⁰ This means that in technical terms, his prior and righteous *belief* in the promised heir is part of the background. In other words, Abram's *unbelief* is essential to the story and his *belief credited as righteousness* is not essential, although it does heighten the tension.⁴¹

If we can ask the same questions with or without a particular element, then it is not essential. In this instance, we can ask, "Why does Abram not trust YHWH," with and without the prior account of his belief in the promised progeny. The prior account of Abram's belief gives us reason to fill out the question such as: "Why does Abram not trust YHWH, *especially considering his trust in YHWH with regard to his coming heir?*" But Abram's *belief* is not essential in order to understand the power of these plot events.

With Abram's *unbelief* as an initial plot event, we progress toward resolution of this problem. In this narrative, resolution appears to be the normalization of Abram and YHWH's fiduciary relationship. Although the larger narrative of Genesis dictates that trust in YHWH is normative, this particular story gives us reason to ask, "How do we trust YHWH when we cannot see or envisage a reason to trust?" Under this interrogation, Abram's *belief in the*

³⁹ See Appendix A for a diagram of Genesis 15.

⁴⁰ While 'unbelief' is an appropriate term here, it should not be read in the sense of skepticism or doubt. The belief/unbelief tension is really a trust/no trust conflict. Hence, the pure mentalist and epistemic terms like 'belief' don't seem to fully capture what is being displayed in this passage. This is made more pointed when one considers the semantic domain of 'to know' as used in the Pentateuch. In that corpus alone, it can denote meanings from mental ascent to sexual intimacy.

⁴¹ Powell, following Roland Barthes, would therefore consider *unbelief* to be a *kernel event* and Abram's *belief* to be a *satellite event* in the discourse. Mark Allen Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism*, 36.

promised heir is viewed more as trust than knowledge with the effect that the reader becomes sympathetic to Abram's *unbelief concerning the promised land*.

Conflict drives plot forward, but here, the problem, conflict and resolution come tightly packed within the temporal setting of the discourse (day, dusk, evening). The plot could be summarized this way: God promises, Abram doesn't believe, and God answers his unbelief in a ceremony. The major question begged by this narrative is, "How is this ceremony and divine monologue an answer to Abram's question in verse eight?" The question itself presumes two things: that Abram has asked a legitimate question of God and that the ceremony and discourse are indeed an answer to his question. These presumptions draw upon the idea of 'unified narrative' and seem to correspond to the story as it is canonically presented.⁴²

Indeed, we receive an answer to the reader's question in verse thirteen. Abram's question was, "...how am I *to know* (אָדַע) that I shall possess it [the land]?" YHWH's answer is, "*Know for certain* (וְיָדַעְתָּ וְיָדַעְתָּ) that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs..." We could summarize YHWH's response in three parts: Have Abram prepare a ritual (9-11), proclamation concerning descendants (12-16), ceremony enacted with reification and expansion of promised land (17-21).

Again, we return to the previous question urged by the narrative: "In what way are these three parts an answer to Abram's question in verse eight?" John Sailhammer notes in his commentary on Genesis that there are references with similitude, but no known parallels to this ceremony in the Ancient Near East.⁴³ Although we may be tempted to look toward historical analysis for help, it offers little assistance to explain this exact ritual. But the narrative itself provides what is essential to understand the story and its place amongst the Abrahamic accounts.

The initial conflict, Abram's unbelief, needs to be resolved. Abram asked how he is to know that God will indeed do what He has promised. God answers by first, making Abram slaughter particular kinds of animals and lay them in particular arrangement. Abram then goes to sleep, but in such a way that the words of YHWH can be heard and understood. The divine

⁴² But we should note that there could be a reading here that breaks literary boundaries and thus views this narrative as two different elements: Abram's question and then a whole new pericope of covenant ritual.

⁴³ While Jeremiah 34:18 bears similitude (as does an Assyrian/Arpad treaty), there is nothing that specifically fits what is described in Genesis 15. See John H. Sailhammer, *Genesis*. The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1990), 130.

discourse begins with epistemological reassurance and ends with a supernatural event (re a torch passing I between the animal parts). Lastly, God verbally declares that this is a covenant ceremony and reiterates the promise of land along with an expanded discourse that clarifies the initial taciturn description of the land (re “this land”, 15:7).

A close reading of the narrative reveals what is minimally efficient in this passage; that this combination of discourse and prescribed ritual will somehow address Abram’s concerns. The natural elements of the covenant ceremony are the prepared cut animals laid out against each other. The divine elements are the smoke and fire brazier that move in between the pieces of animal. The other divine element is the discourse that accompanies the actions. The discourse is clearly meant to reassure Abram of what has already been promised through 1) direct and concrete language (e.g. ‘Know for certain’ using the infinitive absolute construct), 2) a definitive revelation of the generations and coming history of Abram’s descendants, and 3) a socio-geographical description of the land that is being promised. This works together with the ritual in order to answer Abram’s concern.

Finally, what are we to make of this cryptic ritual? Again, without going afield from the narrative itself, we can come to minimally sufficient conclusions that resolve the literary tension. Abram has already experienced divine promises about the land and responded with the building of an altar.⁴⁴ These responses to divine discourse indicate a connection between the sacrificial offerings of life coincident to discrete revelation from YHWH.

But in this instance, we do not see Abram responding to the restatement of promises by erecting an altar. Instead, we see inexplicable reticence and YHWH instructing Abram to make a sacrifice of another sort. If nothing else we see that *animal sacrifice* and *revelation from YHWH* are somehow connected in Abram’s thinking. Further, YHWH supernaturally acts within the spatio-temporal setting of the sacrificial offering and combines this theophany with the revelatory discourse described above. Further, YHWH explicitly mentions that this divine action and discourse were a covenant ceremony.

If we strip the story down to its most essential features, we still find reason to believe that this was fundamentally a covenantal act in which Abram was unable to participate. We see YHWH vowing Himself to an explicit historical outworking of His promises. These were all done with the precise intention of answering the epistemological crisis of Abram from the

⁴⁴ See Genesis 12:7-9 & 13:14-18.

opening of the passage. This covenant, meant to convince Abram, required the death of animals and divine manifestation, unless we take these as gratuitous elements. If we consider the greater covenantal scheme that unfolds through the Exodus, this covenant ceremony appears to be minimally efficient and for the express purpose of convincing Abram and binding YHWH to a discrete outworking of history.

Assessment of Narrative Criticism

The advantages in adopting narrative criticism as a means of understanding scripture for Evangelicals are palpable. Narrative criticism offers a way to find meaning from the sacred texts that upholds the principles of coherence, unity, submission to the Word of God and advocates for perspicuity. As demonstrated above, it also gives a meaningful way to discuss facets of sociological/historical practices whose full significance may be obfuscated from us. But when that same practice is seen as plot event, rather than an objective ritual, it can be viewed in light of its participation in the story. Rather than concede ignorance of a practice because we cannot offer a philological/historical analysis, narrative criticism allows us to treat the story as a unified narrative that gives some essential meaning to its elements without a robust understanding of its parts.

This, then, is the allure of narrative criticism; that it allows for unity that transcends individual pericopes and in critical practice develops the skill of closer and submitted reading of the story. Norman Peterson describes this submission where he says, “For from that moment on we become participants not only in the form of the work but also in the formation of the work and of the imaginative world associated with it.”⁴⁵

This submission to a unified text renders meaning where historical criticism is sometimes incapable of offering analysis. Narrative Criticism can look past documentary and source problems and read a canonical text through a lens that is appropriate for the task. Powell believes that this strength of narrative criticism simultaneously brings together the “professional” and “lay” reader of scripture as well.⁴⁶ Indeed, Hans Frei would espouse that narrative criticism might just be a *return* to a pre-critical and more natural reading of the texts.

⁴⁵ Norman R. Peterson “Literary Criticism in Biblical Studies”, 38.

⁴⁶ Mark Allan Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism*, 87.

Finally, I would add a benefit that is exhibited in the analysis of Genesis 15. Specifically, revelation can be *revealed* with the strictures of narrative criticism. We can let scripture unfold and gain some of the redemptive-historical vantage of the early audience (whether implied or real). This furtive ceremony of animal pieces and torches remains mysterious until we can connect it more fully to the larger redemptive scheme that comes to materialization in Jesus *qua* Messiah. There is a sense, though, where narrative criticism allows us to appreciate the story without knowing its explicit *telos*.

But for its advantages, narrative criticism has yet to find its full voice and justification within the criticisms. Norman Peterson's evaluation of previous critical schools is that they were founded and contingent upon philology. But narrative criticism, while not restricted to philological explication, relies fully on a philosophy of language that demands a thoroughgoing philology. Our explication of Abram's epistemology does not turn on an a particular etymological analysis of אָבְרָם, but our understanding is surely affected by a well-reasoned semantic range of like terms in the Pentateuch. So in one sense, narrative criticism liberates us from positivistic atomism that believes one can understand the whole through deconstruction of the parts. However, for narrative criticism to be viable, that nexus between philology and narrative understanding must be more fully fleshed out.

If narrative criticism could use a more detailed relationship with philology, so much more does it need to illustrate the epistemology that funds this form of criticism.⁴⁷ The assumption that *story effectively conveys meaning* is not plainly axiomatic for all. On what account would we be able to rebuff the statement, "Narrative criticism is just another 'story about stories',"? It could be the case that narrative criticism relies upon a 'story' about how stories work. Without an epistemological basis, there is no reason to rely upon this form of criticism to attain meaning from a text outside of pragmatist efforts; i.e. narrative criticism works at extracting the meaning we value from a narrative. If this is the case, then it also lends no impetus to adjudicate between the veridicality of different narratives. So long as one's narrative and literary critique are in agreement, the source of the narrative and the implications of the critique are marginalized.

⁴⁷ I am sure that there are competent scholars working out this issue. However, I did not find adequate explication in the sources referenced for this essay.

Finally, narrative criticism has difficulty dealing with symbols. The covenant ceremony of Genesis 15 straddles Powell's categories where symbols either find their meaning only in the particular narrative or from the social context.⁴⁸ He acknowledges:

The fourth type of symbol poses a special problem for narrative critics: access to the meaning of these symbols is not gained through the narrative itself, for the implied author simply assumes the reader will understand them.... Symbolism and irony are related insofar as both involve a detection of multiple meanings. Symbolism, however, implies a recognition that something means more than it initially appears to mean....⁴⁹

Clearly the brazier torch and smoke symbolized a richer reality than other objects of like kind. It is plain that a narrative analysis wants to answer the questions begged: "What does the torch symbolize? Why are the animals laid out in that arrangement?" Not only are we hindered from knowing the particulars of the ceremony, but the symbolism of the elements themselves. YHWH could choose any form to manifest and He chose these in Genesis 15. Because narrative is inherently symbolic, in that stories are correspondent to like realities, the specific epistemology of symbolism appears to be a much needed development within narrative criticism.

David M. Gunn critiques grammatical-historical criticism because it is mired in elucidating the philological minutiae of texts while failing to value or answer the more pertinent theological concerns of the Torah. But until narrative criticism is able to give satisfactory epistemological foundations (not that it should be *foundationalist*), then it could be found guilty of the same. For we could walk away from a text like Genesis 15 never having asked a central question presumed by the narrative: "What *kind of an answer* is a sacrificial ceremony and divine discourse to a petition for explicit knowledge (וְיָדָע)?" Narrative criticism does not offer a substantially qualitative rejoinder through the lenses of setting, character, event, etc. One can follow the process and still possibly miss the epistemological (hence theological) forest for the trees.

Conclusion

It has been the purpose of this essay to briefly review the history of narrative criticism and apply its insights to the text of Genesis 15. Through this analysis, we were able to contrast

⁴⁸ Mark Allan Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?*, 29.

⁴⁹ Mark Allan Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?*, 29-30.

it against grammatical-historical criticisms and show some of the acuity that narrative criticism affords beyond grammatical-historical methods. In the end, narrative criticism evinces powerful reasons for its use within scholarship and the church, even if it remains wanton for a robust philosophical and philological undergirding.

Appendix A

1. Vision from YHWH concerning Heirs (following the rescue of Lot and return)
 - a. Fear not, YHWH protects & provides (v 1)
 - i. Abram’s concern about an heir (v 2)
 - ii. Abram’s challenge about an heir (v 3)
 - b. YHWH promises an heir + celestial object lesson (v 4-5)
 - c. Abram believes YHWH and was credited for his belief (v 6)
2. YHWH promises the land (v 7)
 - a. Abram challenges YHWH about the land (v 8)
 - i. YHWH asks for animals (v 9)
 - ii. Abram arranges animals (v 10)
 1. Abram protects arrangement from birds (v 11)
 2. *Sun going down* (v 12)
 3. Abram sleeps (v 12)
 4. Dread came upon him (v 12)
 - b. YHWH answers Abram’s challenge: “Know for certain...” (v 13)
 1. ... your offspring will be sojourners
 2. ... they will become enslaved and afflicted
 3. ... enslaving nation will be judged (v 14)
 4. ... your descendents will gather their spoils
 5. ... you will live long and die in peace (v 15)
 6. ... your descendents will return to Canaan and judgment (v 16)
 - c. Covenant Ceremony: *Sun goes down* (v 17)
 - i. Smoking firepot and torch pass between animals
 1. Summary of YHWH’s covenant-making ‘on that day’ (v 18)
 - a. “To your offspring I give this land...
 - b. ...from the Nile to Euphrates
 - c. ...to the land of (vv 19-21):
 - i. Kenites
 - ii. Kenizzites
 - iii. Kadomites
 - iv. Hittites
 - v. Perizzites
 - vi. Rephaim
 - vii. Amorites
 - viii. Canaanites
 - ix. Girgashites
 - x. Jebusites