



HOW TO READ THE BIBLE: EPISODE 6

# Character in Biblical Narrative

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PROJECT

STUDY NOTES

SECTION 1: THE ROLE OF CHARACTERS IN BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

00:00 - 00:48

Jon: We're talking about how to read biblical narrative, or in other words, how to read stories.

Tim: Right! And one of the main ingredients of any good story is characters who encounter conflict and then have to overcome it.

Jon: Yeah. Let's talk about characters. In most stories, we quickly identify with characters because, just like them, we're in our own story having our own conflicts that we need to overcome.

Tim: Yeah, and good stories have characters with relatable struggles. We can watch them react to these challenges in different ways, and we get to see what happens as a result. Through characters, an author can show us their view of what it means to be human. The Bible is no different. Biblical stories use characters as a mirror, so we can see ourselves and discover our own human nature in the reflection.<sup>1</sup>

1. "Characters are something the biblical authors tend to speak *with* rather than *about*." — J.M. MCCracken, CHARACTER IN THE BOUNDARIES OF BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

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Jon: The thing about characters in the Bible is that they can be hard to relate to. Often, there's very little detail about them.<sup>2</sup>

Tim: Yeah. Biblical authors develop characters differently than modern narratives. They prefer to communicate a lot through minimal detail.<sup>3</sup> For example, we rarely hear what people look like in the Bible, but when we do, it's crucially important for the story.

2. "The Greek storytelling tendency of loading the story with details is one that modern literary practice has by and large adopted and developed. Precisely for that reason we have to adjust our habits as readers in order to bring an adequate attentiveness to the rather different narrative maneuvers characteristic of the Hebrew Bible. The underlying biblical conception of people's character is that they're unpredictable, constantly emerging from and slipping back into ambiguity. Thus, biblical narrative style is marked by the art of reticence." — ROBERT ALTER, THE ART OF BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

3. Two categorical techniques describe how biblical characters are presented in a narrative. "Direct characterization" is when a narrative tells you about characters in straightforward detail. "Indirect characterization" is when the narrative shows you who they are within the context of a story. Direct characterization is extremely rare in the Bible. The author Adele Berlin explains the difference as being similar to realism and impressionism in visual art. Modern realism (think western/Greek narrative style) uses precise brush strokes in its aim to convey near photo-realistic visual objectivity. On the other hand, impressionism (think biblical narrative style) recreates the

sensation of an account by way of the artist highlighting aesthetic values within the composition, prioritizing free-form brush strokes over detail-oriented techniques.

In her book, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, Adele Berlin writes that in impressionist art, "the suggestion of a thing may be more convincing than a detailed portrayal. This is due to the tendency of our brains to project meaning onto images in order to complete our expectations. We see what we expect to see, and the surrounding information guides our perception. This is why we fill in a partially drawn figure to conform to our expectations, and in some cases too much information may destroy the image. The trick, from the artists point of view, is how much detail to include and how much to omit. This is a good corrective for those who wish biblical stories provided more concrete details, but this is precisely its narrative technique. The gaps left in all biblical narratives are intentional, so that with a few deft strokes the biblical author engages the imagination of the reader to construct a picture that is more "real" than if he had filled in David or Abraham or Joseph's portrait with more detail. Minimal representation can give maximal illusion."



Jon: Like we're told that Saul is tall and David was kind of a runt.<sup>4</sup>

Tim: And these become images of their moral character. Saul's height matches his love of status and power to impose authority, while David humbly accepts his low status and allows God to exalt and deliver him.

Jon: So people's physical appearances are symbolic?

Tim: Yeah, very often. Like Esau's hairy body fits his animal-like behavior, and Jacob's smooth skin matches his deceptive, slippery nature.<sup>5</sup>

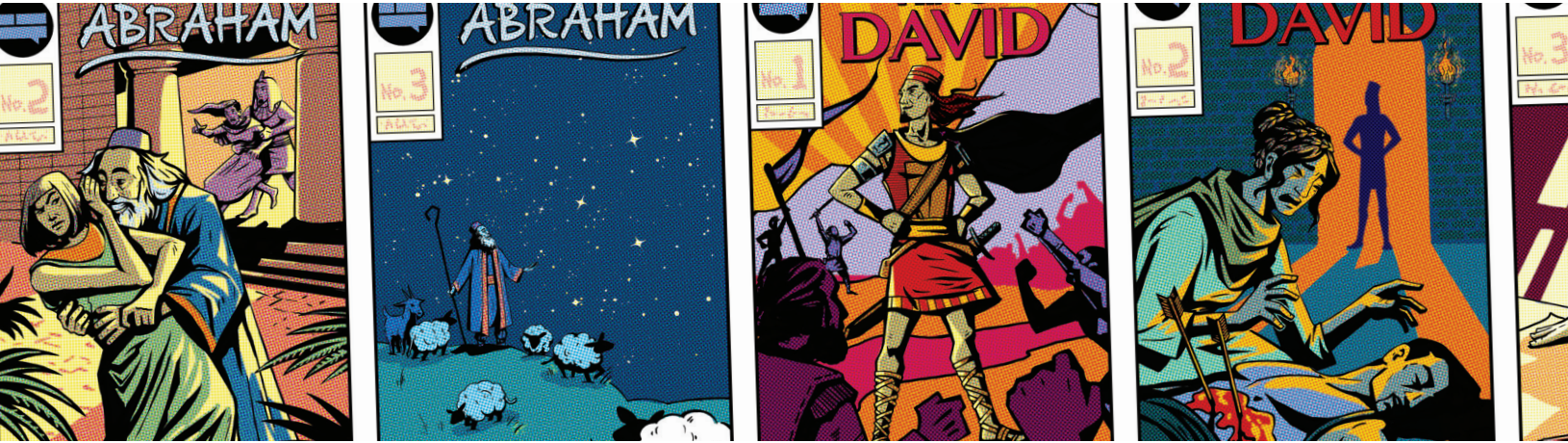
Jon: What other clues do we get about biblical characters?

Tim: Well, often people's names symbolizes their role in the story. "Abraham" in Hebrew sounds like "father of a multitude," "Jacob" means "deceiver," Ruth means "refreshment," and Saul, his name means "the one asked for." He's the flawed king that the people requested.<sup>6</sup>

4. See a description of Saul in 1 Samuel 9:2. In 1 Samuel 16:11, we read that David is a shepherd and the youngest of his brothers.

5. See Genesis 27:11.

6. **DIG IN:** Adam means "humanity," Elijah means "Yahweh is my God," Israel means "struggles with God." Think of a biblical character, and then find out the meaning of their name. Try this with the names Mahlon and Kilion in Ruth 1:5



Jon: So by packing all this meaning with very little detail, biblical stories can do a lot with a little space.

Tim: And they even leave out things that modern readers want to know about these characters. Like they rarely come out and tell us people's thoughts or motives.<sup>7</sup>

SECTION 3: CHARACTERS AND MEANING IN BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

02:10 - 5:03

Jon: Right, like when Moses saw an Egyptian beating an Israelite, he kills him on the spot.<sup>8</sup> But why? Was this righteous anger, or did he just lose his cool? And was it okay with God that he did it?

Tim: Yeah. We're not told because biblical authors usually avoid giving moral commentary.<sup>9</sup> They would rather have a character's words and actions reveal their motives

7. Biblical narrative will often pause for a key character to offer a long speech, poem, or song. Sometimes, but not always, their character is further revealed within these texts. For an example, check out the speeches and prayers in Joshua 24, 1 Samuel 8 and 12, and 1 Kings 8. Also, look up these poems and songs in Genesis 49, Exodus 15, and 1 Samuel 2.

8. See Exodus 2:11-13.

9. "Once you realize the Bible's anti-didactic style is a narrative policy, you gain insight into the role of the aesthetic subtlety of these stories. They almost always shun extended

commentary or explanation, let alone homiletics. These authors intentionally leave gaps for the reader to puzzle over — discontinuities, indeterminacies, non-sequiturs, unexplained motives — and they're fully aware of the disorienting effect this has on readers as they try to draw lessons from the past. Biblical narrators conceal the meaning of their stories to an extent seldom equaled by any other literature in history. This style was not inherited by Israel's neighboring cultures, rather it was invented and elaborated in the Israelite tradition of narrative and it's nothing less than deliberate. — MEIR STERNBERG, THE POETICS OF BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

and then leave us to judge their behavior by seeing the consequences.<sup>10</sup>

So in the case of Moses, this murder's the beginning of a pattern of his anger getting the best of him with bad results. This choice forces him to run and hide in the desert for forty years.

Jon: So it was a bad thing, but he does meet his wife out there, so it's a good thing?

Tim: Exactly. It forces you to ponder. Through all these techniques, the biblical narrators keep the stories compact, memorable, but also engaging.

Jon: But seriously. Was Moses being good or bad? Right? Like in classic stories, there's always a good guy and a bad guy, some admirable hero who faces off against some horrible villain.

Tim: Sure, and simplified characters like that are helpful for teaching children there's such a thing as good and evil, but the Bible is not a children's book. Its characters are very complex, a mixed bag of good and evil, just like us. There's hardly any flawless characters in the Bible.

Jon: What about the heroes of the faith, like Abraham or King David?

10. Biblical authors use characters as a vehicle for their message, primarily through showing rather than telling. These characters possess agency in their ability to communicate ethical values. Shimon Bar-Efrat writes in his book, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*: "Most of an author's view of the world and the values they want to communicate are embodied in the narrative and expressed through the characters. Not only do characters

serve as a narrator's mouthpiece, but also what is and is not related about them, which of their personality traits are emphasized and which are not, these all reveal the ethical values and moral norms within the narrative. The decisions that characters are called upon to make when confronted with moral choices, and the results of their decisions provide indisputable evidence of a narrative's ethical dimension."

Tim: You mean Abraham who used an Egyptian slave for sex and then lied about his wife two times to save his own neck? And David!? The man after God's own heart who sleeps with another man's wife and then murders him?<sup>11</sup> These stories are anything but simplistic; they offer us realistic portraits of compromised people like ourselves.<sup>12</sup> The real surprise is that God keeps working with them despite their failures.<sup>13</sup>

11. Read these stories about Abraham in Genesis 16:3-4; 12:19, and 20:2. Read about David, Bathsheba and Uriah in 2 Samuel 11.

12. "In day to day life, knowledge and information and the ability to understand the meaning of events is power. But in reading the Bible, we're constantly puzzling over the gaps in the stories [Why did Moses do that? Why did God do that?], and this is strategic: our puzzlement is an imitation of our real position in life. It exposes our ignorance about the meaning of history or our lives. Biblical stories imitate our real-life conditions of inference, as we too are daily surrounded by ambiguities, baffled and misled by appearances, reduced to piecing fragments together by trial and error of interpretation, and we're often left in the dark about the meaning of our lives to the very end. The scarcity of commentary by the biblical narrators forces us to constantly evaluate the character's motives and the meaning of the plot as we look for clues. It is only by sustained effort that the reader of biblical narratives can attain to the point of view that God has possessed all along. Making sense of biblical stories is to gain a sense of being human." — MEIR STERNBERG, THE POETICS OF BIBLICAL NARRATIVE: IDEOLOGICAL LITERATURE AND THE DRAMA OF READING

13. Throughout biblical narrative, we see the character of God playing either a present (interventionist) role, or an absent (supervisory) role. For example, God is present and intervening in the stories of Genesis 1-11, as well as in the wilderness stories in the book of Numbers. He is walking, talking, and directly interacting with people. On the other hand, within the stories of Genesis 37-50, the David stories, and in the books of Esther and Ruth, God is depicted as an indirect, sporadically known, and hard to perceive character. God is supervising events from behind the scenes. The drama is about how the characters will relate to God when they don't know what's going on. Regarding this, Yairah Amit, in her book *Reading Biblical Narratives*, writes: "The more God is depicted as a present character, commanding or testing, punishing or forgiving, the more the human characters are depicted in a flat manner, as singular types such as rebellious, obedient, or sinful. But when God is portrayed as absent or behind the scenes, there is more narrative space for multi-faceted human characters and their complex motives."

Jon: So just because a person is called by God, or wins a battle, or becomes successful or wealthy doesn't mean the author wants me to act like them?

Tim: Right. It would actually be really dangerous to imitate most biblical characters.

Jon: True, but there must be something admirable in biblical characters—something I can imitate.

Tim: Absolutely! Pay attention, and you'll notice that most biblical stories highlight the moments when characters fail or come to the end of themselves, and then they choose radical trust in God's grace and wisdom. It's in these stories that the authors show us how to be a human who truly pleases God through humility and surrender.

Jon: Yeah. The fact that God stays committed to biblical characters is a profound statement about the patience and love of God, who is also a character.<sup>14</sup>

Tim: Right, and by studying biblical characters, we can observe our own worst tendencies on display. And we see time and again God's gracious response that will see this story through to the end.

14. God is the only character who continues through every movement of the biblical narrative from beginning to end. This shows us that a fundamental purpose within these stories is to reveal God's character, identity, and purposes in history. In the first few chapters of Genesis, we see God's character in his desire to share with humans goodness and love and for us to share in this with each other. We read of God

bringing justice on human evil as well as forgiveness and restoration. We can observe God's identity as the author of the universe revealed through the family of Abraham and Israel, and then ultimately through Jesus of Nazareth. We can see that God's purpose is to rescue his creation from evil, so that it can be shared together in love for eternity.